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Fantasy AND Science Fiction

24th Anniversary All-Star Issue

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Fritz Leiber • Randall Garrett

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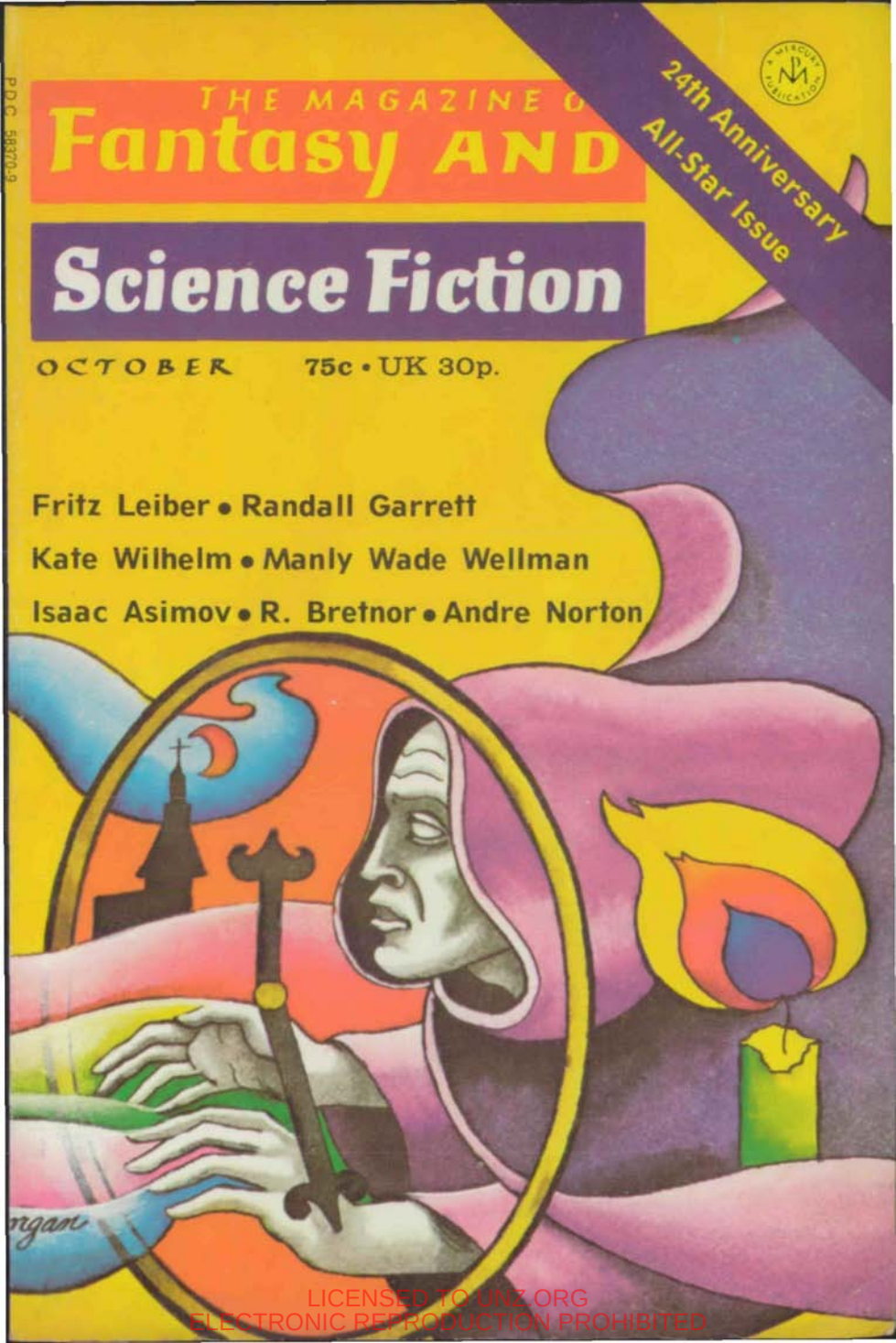
Isaac Asimov • R. Bretnor • Andre Norton



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NOVELETS

Old Uncle Tom Cobleigh And All	R. BRETNOR	5
Color Me Deadly	RANDALL GARRETT	42
Lights Out	GEO. ALEC EFFINGER	127

SHORT STORIES

Cat Three	FRITZ LEIBER	30
Whatever Happened To The Olmecs?	KATE WILHELM	70
The Last Wizard	AVRAM DAVIDSON	90
Dead Man's Chair	MANLY WADE WELLMAN	92
London Bridge	ANDRE NORTON	103

FEATURES

Books	AVRAM DAVIDSON	37
Cartoon	GAHAN WILSON	41
Films	BAIRD SEARLES	100
Forecast From An Orbiting Satellite	SONYA DORMAN	114
Science: The Mispronounced Metal	ISAAC ASIMOV	115

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Thanks to Mr. Bretnor you can sing your way into this anniversary issue. The music on the next page is an old English ballad which sends two professors traveling in time in an attempt to trace its origins and which forms the framework for the delightful story you are about to read. Mr. Bretnor has been working on a book about sf (*Science Fiction, Today and Tomorrow*, to be published by Harper), and the return of his fiction to these pages is a happy event indeed.

Old Uncle Tom Cobleigh And All

R. BRETNOR

It is indeed fortunate that the police cannot solve all mysterious disappearances, for if they had solved Professor Davey's — and if anyone had believed them — it would have upset Murrain University more than any number of student riots, and my own situation would have been far less comfortable than it is.

The quarrel between Professor Davey and Professor Addleweed was, I am sure, due not so much to intellectual conviction as to the difference in their social origins. Lucius Addleweed was a Boston Brahmin, with Harvard in his blood and bones. Davey, the son of an often drunken and habitually unemployed West Virginia coal miner, had scraped through to his Ph.D. in English by grace of native cunning, the G.I. Bill, and a number of grants scrounged for him by Left-oriented members of various faculties. Addleweed, holding the prestigious Sarah Grimsby Murrain Chair of Polite Letters, was the foremost authority on certain minor Nineteenth Century Irish essayists. Davey, on the other hand, had made his reputation largely by discovering and heralding an allegedly black poet named Gooeyduck, who had invented what he called "positional poetry," a technique in which one four-letter Anglo-Saxon word, interminably repeated, conveyed its subtleties of meaning by its many placements on the bare page, as though Mr. Mondrian and the Museum of Modern Art had claimed it for their own. Unhappily, the two men had written their doctoral dissertations on the same subject: the ability of

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Rollicking
mf Solo G D7 G Chorus
1. Tom Pearce, Tom Pearce lend me your grey mare,
2. And when shall I see a - gain my grey mare?
All a-long, down a-long,
mf
Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. etc.
D7 Solo G D7 G+8 Chorus
out a-long lee. For I want for to go to Wid-de-combe Fair,
By Fri - day soon or Sat-ur-day noon,
With Bill
D7 G+8 D7 G+8 D7 G+8
Brewer, Jan Strewer, Pe-ter Gur-ney, Pe-ter Da-vy, Dan'l Whid-der, Har-ry Hawke, Old
D7 G C G D7 G
Un-cle Tom Cob-leigh and all. Old Un-cle Tom Cob-leigh and all.
Ped. Ped. Ped.

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the lowly and unlettered to transmit information from one generation to another, Addleweed contending that their stupidity and lack of adequate frames of reference distorted anything they might latch onto, Davey asserting that their simplicity and purity of spirit guaranteed the essential accuracy of legend, folk song, and many-times-retold country tales over any number of generations.

I myself, as Natural Philosopher in Residence under the Hober Murrain Twitchett Memorial Endowment for the Investigation of the Arcane Sciences, would of course have been completely out of it had I not, quite by accident, managed to bring back to life Roger Bacon's endochronic speculum — that "mirrour to reveal the past" which our great predecessor had so wisely veiled behind double meanings and the most recondite allusions. On my appointment I had been summoned before the Chairman of the Chemistry Department, under whom for some reason I was suppoosed to function, and had been told my status in no uncertain terms.

"Grumpole," he had started impolitely, "get this through your mushy little skull. Twitchett was a nut — but he left us forty million dollars on condition we hire some other nut like you to mess around with alchemy and all that other crap he had a thing about. All right, you mess around with it. Keep your graduate students messing around with it — you can have a couple if you can round 'em up. But don't get in our hair. And stay out of the goddamn papers, understand?"

I followed his instructions to the letter, messing around, as he put it, with my two graduate students and, once or twice a year, publishing an adequately obfuscated paper in an adequately obscure journal — or at least lending my name as co-author to those written by the young men working under me. While I was completely uninterested in alchemy, the situation was ideal; my own major area of research — sorcery. It is a great pity, really, that Mr. Shagreen did not see eye to eye with me. We could have done great things together.

Mr. Shagreen became my third graduate student. He was from somewhere near the Persian Gulf, and very smooth and plump. His wealthy parents had sent him to an excellent English public school and then to Trinity College, Dublin, where he had been graduated with honors. When he spoke, he sometimes sounded disconcertingly like one of the more lucid characters in *Finnegans Wake,* but there was much more to him than that. He had taken his M.S. in physics at a major Indian

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university, where the head of his department — how different from my own! — had doubled in brass as his spiritual mentor, or *guru.** I accepted him as what he seemed to be: an ambitious doctoral candidate sensibly taking advantage of a fat grant. I did not guess that alchemy was really his true love, or that he had enough Greek and Latin and even Arabic to dig far deeper than I into its occult literature. I didn't realize it until he — or perhaps I should say he and I — remade the speculum.

Prior to his arrival our work had all been on an abstract level: the discussion and comparison of theories, the elaboration of historical fact and legendary fancy. Mr. Shagreen's project, however, required all the trimmings — retorts and alembics, furnaces and bellows, elixirs and reagents. I did my utmost to discourage him, pointing out that no funds had been allocated for such purposes. He countered with the statement that, as his family was very rich, this did not matter; he himself would pay all expenses. But actually it was because of his birthday present to me that finally I relented. Having learned what my true interest was, he wrote to an uncle of his in Iran, skilled craftsmen were set instantly to work, and six months later I was the astonished owner of a splendid carpet, rich in reds, deep blues, and glowing greens and yellows, woven especially for me in the design of a perfect pentacle surrounded by all the proper cabalistic signs and symbols. Three men were needed to bear it to my office and spread it out before my eyes, and Mr. Shagreen managed it all with an almost childish delight, animated solely by the desire to please me, his mentor, and (as I found out later) to impress Miss Willa Kornmulder, my secretary, one of those opulently rounded blondes with a lovely complexion and no features worth mentioning.

"Look there, will you, old Grumps, my dear!" he cried affectionately as it was displayed before me. "I've had a magic carpet made for you, indeed! And it's the truth that you can fly upon it from here to Araby the Blest, if you've a mind to."

I was touched. I completely ignored Willa's giggling comment about the possibility of my being sky-jacked, and next day I bestirred myself in his behalf and secured him laboratory space — a dark cellar of a room in an ancient brick warehouse now devoted mainly to smelly experiments with small

*The dubious reader is referred to Explorations in Tibet, by Swami Pranavananda, F.R.G.S., the frontispiece of which shows the author's guru, head of the physics department at a major Indian university.

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rodents, California pocket gophers and the like. He was perfectly happy there and in no time had converted it into a scene which I'm sure Paracelsus would have found congenial, with its hubblings and bubblings and decoctings, stinks, reeks, and stenches — and with Miss Kornmulder helping him in her spare time, at least when they weren't love-making.

How little one really knows even of one's close associates! When Mr. Shagreen asked me to contrive a simple love spell for him, I did notice that his lecherous eye was on her, but no one told me that she had already had affairs, not only with several students in a number of departments, but also, unsatisfactorily, with Professor Davey, and perhaps more pleasantly because they still were friends, with Professor Addleweed.

Nobody warned me, and consequently I was completely unprepared when it happened — and it happened very suddenly. I had paid little attention to Mr. Shagreen's work, countersigning his strange requisitions mechanically, for after all he *was* paying for them — so much gray quicksilver, so much purple laudanum, so many pecks of most peculiar charcoal from Sinkiang, one ounce troy of the finest platinum, forty of fine silver, eight gills of urine from a female camelopard taken by a Nubian virgin during the vernal equinox — that last was rather hard to come by — and I know not what. Also, I had listened to him patiently enough when he explained to me that the speculum, completed, would resemble in its functioning nothing so much as a programmed computer. "It is science, that's what it is, old Grumps," he'd say, "not any magic mish-mash, not at all. There's no magic when one knows what causes what and what one's doing. Why, I shall manipulate the metal's body spiritual, as you might say, so that it'll be attuned not only to the celestial configurations, but to my voice indeed, and what we wish, and every heart's desire. And this in turn will dominate its body physical, its atoms and its molecules, in their innumberable dimensions and permutations. Oh, it's all down in black and white, my dear fellow, if you just happen to know a little of the Arabic and whatever. Friar Bacon set it down, taking care to hide a bit here and a dribbling there against the curiosity of the unthinking, but I have riddled it all out now, indeed —"

He said a great deal more in the same vein, and I paid no heed — not even when he invited me to watch the final casting of the speculum. I turned him down, on one pretext or another, and he went off muttering petulantly, "You

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should, you really should, old Grumpole! For it's going to make us famous, you and me. Famous, I dare say!"

Fame, of course, was one thing I did *not* want; I was completely satisfied with matters as they stood.

It was next morning that he came to me, Willa Kornmulder helping him, both of them panting from the weight of a large object hidden under a paisley shawl. Dramatically, he pulled the shawl away. "There you have it, Grumps!" he laughed triumphantly. "We've made a magic mirror for your magic carpet. Here it is!"

I beheld a bronze frame, nearly four feet in diameter, on an ornate bronze standard. Within it was a disk — a disk obviously made of metal, silver-gray perhaps, or perhaps the disturbing green of a cloud-shaded sea, sea-metal tense in its uneasiness, straining against its own tremendous tides. I saw that Mr. Shagreen had indeed produced something rich and strange, and cleared my throat to cover my abrupt chill of apprehension. I sat back in my chair, forcing myself to be elaborately calm. "And does it work?" I asked.

At once, his face fell. "I — I'm sure it will," he said uncertainly. "There's but one thing lacking, Dr. Grumpole, indeed there is, and that is — well, the Word of Power."

It was my turn to laugh triumphantly — and with relief. "In other words, my boy," I said, "you need a bit of magic, don't you? Well, well, you've come to the right shop for that. I've no doubt that given a few months we can pop up with just the one old Roger had in mind. Now let me think — there really were so many of 'em I don't know where to start —"

And, certain that we'd never find the right one, I — God help me! — uttered three of four at random, well known ones with which even amateur practitioners are conversant. And with the last — no, I shall not repeat it here! — the face of that strange mirror blanched suddenly, and stilled within itself, and vanished. Where it had been there was a window into an unformed world, shadowy, vague as a drifting fog at nightfall. And a deep voice from nowhere, from somewhere in the air surrounding us, said, *"Time Was!"*

Even I knew, then, that it was the voice of Friar Bacon's terrible brazen head.

"It *works!*" breathed Mr. Shagreen. "Grumps! Grumps! That is the *past* we're gazing at, indeed! Now all we have to do is think of any certain moment, and order it!"

"The Custer Massacre!" exclaimed Miss Kornmulder excitedly. "I was watching it last night on Channel Twel —"

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Before she could so much as finish, the shadows disappeared. Bright sunlight took their place — sunlight and shots and screams of dying men. And, in the portal, the horribly painted, savage, howling face of a Sioux brave confronted us. For an instant only — then a war arrow, with a whistling scream, missed my left ear by a scant two inches and buried itself in the far wall, quivering beside the portrait of Hober Murrain Twitchett that hung there.

"Time *Is!*" Shagreen screamed desperately; and I, in the nick of time, shouted out the Word of Power. Instantly, the speculum confronted us again, once more its restless, solid self.

"For God's sake!" complained Willa Kornmulder. "That was lots better than Channel Twelve. Why did you guys have to go and turn it off?"

I pointed to the arrow with a trembling hand. Mr. Shagreen and I were thunderstruck by what had happened, and by its implications, he by the wonder and the fear of it, I — an older and, I think, wiser man — by the desperate need to keep it absolutely secret lest the vulgar press get wind of it or, even worse, the head of my department and his hirelings. With admirable presence of mind, I started marshalling my arguments. He listened, offering only a feeble and ill-considered opposition. Miss Kornmulder, ignored by both of us, sulked and pouted for a few minutes, then disappeared. Mr. Shagreen declared that *his* discovery was of earth-shaking importance and should be made public. I countered with the statement that, without the pentacle and my Word of Power, there'd have been no discovery, and that, as *magic,* it should be kept from the uninitiated and uncomprehending — certainly until we ourselves had had a chance to explore all its possibilities and perils. Back and forth we argued for perhaps fifteen minutes, and I know that he was about to bow before my logic — to say nothing of the arrow's — for finally he had admitted the crucial role magic had played in it, when suddenly the decision was rudely taken from us. Miss Kornmulder came back into the room, accompanied by Professor Addleweed, who seemed tremendously excited.

Addleweed's quarrel with Davey had, I knew, been going badly for him. Three weeks before, Davey had announced a sensational artistic breakthrough by Gooeyduck who, by adding the word *mother* to his monosyllabic repertoire, had "immeasurably expanded the emotional and cultural scope of positional poetry." Addleweed promptly had denounced the whole thing as hogwash and a

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prime example of how the semi-literate, the pushing, the unscrupulous, and the unwashed could — especially when mistakenly sanctified by being granted Doctorates of Philosophy — take advantage of a gullible academic community. Thereupon Davey had delivered an impassioned lecture tracing positional poetry back, by way of voodoo, hot jazz, and soul food, to the folk art of Dahomey and Basutoland. A group of Davey's more excited students had set fire to Addleweed's office and had (rather to his relief) destroyed all his examination records for the past seven years. Finally, though I didn't know it then, Davey had challenged Addleweed to a contest of theories, through their simultaneous application to a specific problem — the results to be published in the student paper, and the entire student body to decide the winner by voice vote. Foolishly, Addleweed had accepted, not knowing that Davey had proposed a problem to which he already had an answer, and Davey had neatly pulled the rug from under him.

The problem had appeared a straightforward one: to take a rural English ballad (which Addleweed was sure was of doubtful authenticity) and, each employing his own methods, trace it to its origins and determine the degree of accuracy with which the local yokels had passed it to posterity. Its first verse and chorus went:

Tom Pearce, Tom Pearce, lend me your gray mare.

All along, down along, out along lee.

For I want to go to Widdecombe Fair,

Wi' Bill Brewer, Jan Stewer, Peter Gurney, Peter Davy, Dan'l Whiddon, Harry Hawk, Old Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all — Old Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all.

The "All along, down along," and the roster of names were repeated in each of the half dozen or more succeeding verses, which told a vaguely gruesome tale of the loss of the entire company and the subsequent haunting of "the moor of a night." Davey had first been attracted to it because of the fact that one of them had borne his own name (even if spelled a little differently), and on impulse he had consulted the vast genealogical archives of the Mormon Church, which contain every parish record in Western Europe, and which of course had already been computerized. Listing several variant spellings for each name, he had asked the computer to scan for the simultaneous death or disappearance, during the 18th or early 19th Centuries, of such a group of Englishmen — and, much to his astonishment, the computer had replied that, yes indeed, on

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Midsummer's Eve, 1769, near Marlow in Buckinghamshire, had died "William Brewer, John Stewart, Peter Garney, Daniel Whidden, Mr. Henry Hawke, Thomas Joseph Pierce, and Thomas Cobleigh, Esq., aged 77." The only one not mentioned was his namesake, but Davey, after a momentary flicker of annoyance, told himself that probably the man had simply been shrewd enough to escape their common fate, or — even more likely — that here was a splendid example of oral tradition being more accurate than recorded history. He promptly announced his discovery to the world via the underground press and one or two impressionable TV commentators; the tabloids and straight media at once took it up; and instantly poor Addleweed became the laughing-stock, not only of our English Department, but of campuses from coast to coast. The Chancellor's Office even sent him a formal note requsting him to list his publications during the preceding several years "together with any other information which he thought might justify his retention on the Faculty." He had, of course, taken the precaution of checking with the Mormons, and they had corroborated the information Davey had been given, adding that each name had at least been followed by the designation *Gentleman,* while Sir John Stewart had actually been a baronet — matters which Davey had not seen fit to mention. Still, there was scant consolation in this for Addleweed. Indeed, after Gooeyduck had published a positional ode entitled "White Fascist Pig Addleweed, How You Like *That,* Man?" which was a howling success, nobody would so much as listen to him; and he had lost all hope even of defending himself against his adversary when Willa Kornmulder (recollecting, I imagine, tender moments they had spent together) betrayed us to him.

Addleweed was a very tall, lean, long-jawed man with a great many teeth and some untidy butter-colored hair. Now, as he came in behind Miss Kornmulder, his pale eyes opened wide at the sight of that uneasy speculum, and he exclaimed without preamble, "What's this, Thaddeus Grumpole? I hear you've made yourself a *time machine?*"

"Oh, but it isn't a *machine,* no, not a bit of it!" Mr. Shagreen protested. "Never a cog does it have; nor gear, nor noisy moving part will you find in it. It is an *instrument,* a device indeed, derived by marriage of modern physics and art alchemical to open, as it were, windows to the past, to what's long gone — and that discreetly too, without discomfiture to anyone —"

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"Dr. Grumpole didn't invent it," Miss Kornmulder broke in, making calf eyes at him. *"Tuffy* did. And I just know he won't mind your using it, Lucius honey, to prove that bastard Davey doesn't know his hind end from a hot rock."

At that point, I decided to intervene. "We have decided," I declared firmly, "that for the moment no disclosure can be made. The device is still untried, and certainly much scientific enquiry must precede any actual use of it. As a scholar, Dr. Addleweed, I'm sure you'll understand."

Addleweed stared coldly at me, and his grin, despite the number of its teeth, was a most unpleasant one. *"Untried,* you say?" He pointed at the arrow in the wall. "Someone, it seems to me, has tried it to rather good effect. A two-way window to the past — it's fabulous! Grumpole, how can you keep so great a wonder bottled up? Our friend Tuffy here deserves full and immediate recognition — and so of course do you, and so does Murrain. We must inform the President and Chancellor, the Academic Senate, and for reasons of security, I would imagine, the F.B.I. and the Department of Defense. Willa, my dear, why don't you start phoning people right away?"

One of the precious lessons of maturity is how to give in with good grace. Shagreen and I glanced at each other. We both sat down. "Professor Addleweed," I said, returning the grin as cheerfully as I could, "naturally what I said does not preclude the sound suggestions of reputable scholars — yourself, for instance — regarding the direction our initial experiments will take. However, we must ask both you and Miss Kornmulder here to say not a word to *anyone.*"

"I wouldn't dream of it," he answered, now toothier than ever. "Shall we start at once?"

"Why not? Suppose we start with just a simple demonstration? We'll look in on my office here, yesterday after hours."

He nodded, and I walked over to the speculum. I pointed at it, and rapidly, in a low voice, repeated several Words of Power, some false, some genuine; and in their midst I sandwiched in the true one, the actuator — it never would have done to let him know it — and, as the mirror came to life, I saw Mr. Shagreen beam his approval at me. Around us, suddenly, the deep voice said, *"Time Was!"*

"This office at eight o'clock last night!" I ordered — and we were looking through into the night before.

Momentarily, Addleweed lost his insouciance. He paled. *"Wh-who said that?"* he demanded.

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"With good reason — oh, I assure you, with good, sufficient reason," Mr. Shagreen told him, "we believe it to have been that very head, that same fine brazen head, of which, you will recall, Friar Bacon told us."

"Well, it's a good trick, Tuffy." Addleweed made a remarkable recovery. "Now shall we see if you can cross over there into *Time Was?*"

"I assure you that I can and will, indeed," Shagreen declared. "That's the beauty of it, do you see? — that we can shuttle ourselves back and forth at will, for the alchemical instructions I have found are complete astoundingly." Then, literally, he stepped into the speculum and through it and stood before us in the yesterday. He smiled, took from my desk a ball-point pen, walked back toward us, whispered, *"Enfold me!"* and was back abruptly in our midst.

"Time is!" he ordered, and again the speculum took form. I remembered that I had been unable to find my pen all day.

Addleweed made no effort now to hide his excitement and his eagerness. "Could you see us?" he asked. "Or could you see the speculum?"

"Not a bit of it, indeed," Shagreen replied. "Neither a jot nor tittle, but I could feel it there behind my back directly, for in the past it follows you, you understand? And never leaves you, so you can always pop back safely to here and now — very pretty programming, though perhaps in perfect modesty I shouldn't say so, and a great convenience."

"A great *in*convenience for Professor Peter Davey," gloated Addleweed. "Let's waste no time. We know the date. Send me back into the Eighteenth Century, give me an hour or two or three to find the facts, and we'll demolish him, I promise you!"

"Oh, we will, will we?" brayed a new voice from the door. It was a coarse voice with a thick veneer of culture, making me think of a shoddy paperback mistakenly bound in crushed Levant morocco. I turned my head. Davey was standing there.

He was a well-set-up young fellow, but he had managed to conceal the fact. Rough sandals shod his dirty bare feet. Worn jeans, an ancient military tunic from the Boer War, a grubby sweatshirt, and a huge peace symbol on a string completed his attire. He was, of course, copiously whiskered, and his dull black hair hung to his shoulder blades. However, he carried a proper professorial briefcase — a symbol, I imagine, of his tenure.

"My God!" I said. "How long have you been here?"

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"Long enough, you bastards," he replied. "So the two of you have got yourself a time machine, is that it? I damn well knew all that jazz about alchemy was just a cover! Millions are starving. Millions are murdered by imperialistic pigs. And you build *this*. Who financed you? The Pentagon? Dow Chemical? The lousy Rockefellers?"

"Mr. Shagreen's project," I told him coldly, "has been supported by the Hober Murrain Twitchett Memorial Endowment for the Investigation of the Arcane Sciences."

"And by my Uncle Hassan, who is rich as Croesus ever was, I do believe, and kindly too," Mr. Shagreen added.

"And you're going to let this fink here use the thing — which ought to be devoted to the welfare of the people — to make a liar out of me, is that it?" Davey snorted rudely. "I knew some dirty work was going on when I spotted him coming here with that tart you've got working for you. Well, all of you better think again! If anybody goes, it's going to be *me*. I wouldn't trust Piddleweed six weeks away, let alone two hundred years."

Addleweed favored him with a superior smile. "My good Davey," he purred, "you'd really better not. After all, you'd be among English *gentlemen* — your betters, as it were. They'd spot you instantly. Besides, everyone was clean-shaven in those days; your lovely facial fungus would have to go."

"Don't worry about me, you creep!" Davey's features twisted in a snarl. "And I can always grow my beard again."

"Gentlemen —" I said, and the word evoked still another snarl from Davey. "Gentlemen, we have a fascinating experiment before us. Why don't you *both* go, together?"

"Don't be funny, Grumpole. You think I'd go back there among those dirty fascists with *him?* And leave you here to slam the door on both of us?"

"No, that would never do," said Addleweed.

Something of the sort had indeed been in my mind, even though I was by no means sure that we *could* slam the door. However, now I was finally thinking with the swiftness and efficiency which only long study of magical disciplines can inculcate. "Well, in that case —" I smiled upon them — "allow me to point out that it really doesn't matter which one goes? As Mr. Shagreen has already demonstrated, the speculum follows the time traveler everywhere, and the one left behind can watch his every action and hear his every word. Why don't you flip a coin? Then, to even things up, the loser can take a short exploratory trip into that same century, just so that the other

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can be sure that everything'll work."

The two of them glared at each other distrustfully; they glared at me and at Shagreen.

"Hey, does that blow my mind!"Miss Kornmulder cried out enthusiastically. "Each of you gets to watch the other guy, and I get to watch the both of you. That's got to be a better show than *Fanny Hill!*"

"I'm afraid dear Willa misunderstands our purposes," remarked Addleweed wryly.

"*She* would!" growled Davey.

"I'll flip the coin!" offered Miss Kornmulder, in no way put down.

"The hell you will, you stupid bitch!" Davey almost spat at her. "I'll flip the frigging coin!" He fished a quarter from his pocket. "But only if the one of us who's proven wrong agrees to admit it publicly, resign from the faculty, and get the hell away from Murrain."

After only a moment's hesitation, Addleweed nodded his agreement.

"Okay," Davey sneered. "You want to call it, fink?"

"Heads," said Addleweed.

Davey sent the coin tumbling over and over in the air. It landed on the carpet at my feet. None of us touched it. We all stared down at it.

"It's tails!". I announced, and Davey crowed in triumph.

Angrily, Miss Kornmulder stamped her dainty foot, but Addleweed, though obviously crestfallen, took it in surprisingly good part. He shrugged. "If we're lucky," he remarked, "maybe a recruiting party'll pick him up. Wouldn't he look fine with a Brown Bess musket on his shoulder and all that hair powdered and tucked into an eel skin?"

I moved in swiftly. "Now that we have that settled, my dear sirs," I said with unction, "why don't we go our several ways till after dinner and then meet here again? That will enable you to find suitable attire, which will of course be essential, and it'll give Professor Davey a chance to shave."

"Yeah?" grunted Davey. "And come back to an empty office, with both you and Shagreen denying everything?"

Again, Addleweed and his enemy agreed. "I'm afraid that's the way of it, Grumpole," he declared. "Why don't we stay right here? Willa knows somebody in the drama department rather well —"

Miss Kornmulder simpered.

"— and I'm sure he'll furnish her the costumes. Neither of us should be too hard to fit. And we can have dinner sent up to us from some Chinese or Italian restaurant. We'll have a jolly little picnic and then set forth. As I'm making the first trip, I'll choose to visit Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whom I do not

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hold in very high regard, but whom I have always wished I could have met simply because he did write one or two good essays."

"Well, I can't wait here with you," said Miss Kornmulder. "If I'm going to work on Jody to crack open that backstage wardrobe, it's going to have to be in person and right away. Jody's a real feelum, smellum boy. My voice over the phone wouldn't crease him."

Mr. Shagreen frowned at her jealously, but I frowned at him, and he made no active protest. Neither did Addleweed or Davey; clearly there was no other way to go about it.

She blew a kiss at Shagreen, called out, "Save me some shrimp chow mein, beddy-boy!" and took her leave.

Professor Davey was already on the phone ordering an Italian dinner from a restaurant near the campus, and it was delivered to us — minestrone, green salad, veal scallopini, pasta, and two bottles of red wine to wash it down with — in less than twenty minutes

I shall never forget that strange meal. Addleweed's table manners were precise and picky. Davey's were deliberately abominable. Addleweed, between bites, speculated on the nature of the incident from which the song had started. Widdecombe, or Widecombe on Mere, he pointed out, was in Devon, more than a hundred miles from Marlow. If there had indeed been a fair at Widdecombe, coinciding with the summer solstice, certainly no Buckinghamshire gentleman could reach it, however hard-riding he might be, unless it lasted much, much longer than country fairs were wont to last. Davey, between gulps and belches, told him he was an idiot not to know that, in the Eighteenth Century, hard-drinking country gentlemen would — at least when they weren't busy grinding the faces of the poor — take any wager, however hazardous, if horses were involved, and it was obvious that Tom Pearce's gray mare must have been a famous horse indeed.

Halfway through dinner, Willa Kornmulder rejoined us, bringing her eager, panting Jody with her. Mr. Shagreen prudently had covered up the speculum again with the paisley shawl, but Jody was too much absorbed in the Kornmulder anatomy to have noticed it anyhow. He brought in the two costumes in their mothproof bags and put them down and congratulated whichever of us were going to the masquerade, and Willa had a little difficulty in getting him to leave. Finally, though, he was gone, and she displayed what he had found us: for Addleweed a fine gray suit of watered silk with silver buttons, knee breeches and silk stockings,

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expensive linen, a periwig, a silver-braided tricorn hat, silver-buckled shoes, a silver-hilted smallsword; for Davey, the costume of a poor Church of England clergyman, coat, breeches, stockings, hat all black, no sword at all, and a rumpled white stock which seemed to advertise a whining ecclesiastical humility.

Davey sputtered an obscenity. Addleweed asked him if he was quoting the great poet Gooeyduck. Miss Kornmulder explained hypocritically, "I'm sorry. It was all he had would fit you, Peter." She also produced a razor and a can of aerosol shaving cream, which Jody had been kind enough to lend her. Davey turned red, quoted Gooeyduck at length, then with ill grace accepted the inevitable. He stormed out of the room, carrying the razor and the costume, and returned fifteen minutes later a different man.

Even without his whiskers, he made a villainous-looking parson; and Addleweed, who had changed his garments shamelessly in front of all of us, stared at him in amused astonishment. "Don't tell me!" he said archly. "Let me guess — the Vicar of Wakefield? No, that won't do at all. The Vicar of Bray? No, by that time he'd have gone to his reward. I know — you're the Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come!" And he roared with laughter.

If he had not had the sword, I'm sure Davey would have attacked him physically; as it was, we finished up our dinner in a hostile silence broken only by the affectionate murmurings of Mr. Shagreen and Miss Kornmulder, who were repairing the small rift caused by the intrusion of young Jody into their affairs.

Finally, Davey thrust back his plate, wiped his hands on his coattails, and said, "All right. For Christ's sake, let's get *with* it!"

Addleweed sipped his glass of wine, taunting him deliberately, and I felt impelled to intervene again. "We really should, you know," I told them. "Our experiments must be completed before the janitors arrive."

"Very well." Addleweed arose; he walked up to the speculum. "Turn the thing on," he said.

Hurriedly, I chattered out the Words of Power. *"Time Was!"* announced the brazen head we could not see.

"The year 1797," declared Addleweed, speaking clearly and distinctly. "An isolated farmhouse on Exmoor, between the villages of Porlock and Linton, the house at which Samuel Taylor Coleridge is staying to recuperate. The day is not important, but it must be when he is in — and of course out of sight of anyone."

Even before he finished, the

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undefined past dissolved, and we were looking at a farmhouse, apparently from around the corner of an outbuilding. Addleweed looked a little apprehensive, but he did not hesitate. He steped through into the Eighteenth Century, glanced about him when a dog began to howl, and walked straight to the door. A serving woman, perhaps the farmer's daughter, answered his knock. "Good day to you, sir. What brings you here?" she said.

"I'm here to meet the celebrated Mr. Coleridge, my good woman," he replied grandiloquently, "for I have matters of great moment to discuss with him, and have come from Porlock for the purpose."

The woman turned her head. "Here's a person from Porlock, Mr. Coleridge," she called out. "He declares he has business with you."

And we heard Coleridge's voice replying, a bit testily, "Well, I suppose I'll have to see him, though he comes at a bad time. Show him in."

The speculum followed Addleweed as he was ushered through into a plainly furnished room, where Coleridge presently appeared, looking slightly disheveled and with reddened eyes, as though only recently awakened. He was unmistakable: the slightly curling, black, untidy hair, the wide mouth, the thin, pale features. But when he spoke, greeting Addleweed, such was his charm that even Davey, for a moment, stopped sneering and muttering imprecations.

Then we were treated to an almost unbelievable performance, for Addleweed introduced himself by his true name, explained that he was visiting in the neighborhood, but that he had come from the new United States, where he was a man of substance and a trustee of Harvard College.

At that point, Coleridge smiled and remarked pleasantly, "I daresay, sir, that this explains why your attire, though of the finest quality, is some years behind our fashion."

Addleweed, in no way put out, explained that this was so, and that his friends in the vicinity — who by the way had dropped him there by coach and would return for him in possibly an hour — had told him the same thing.

"An hour!" howled Davey. "The son of a bitch — taking up an *hour,* when he knows I'm waiting to get our really important job done! Damn him! Isn't there any way we can snake him back here?"

"Oh, dear!" answered Mr. Shagreen unhappily. "I fear there isn't any way, no way at all, indeed — unless perhaps truly you'd like to go yourself, and catch him by the arm, and pull him back by main

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force? Though even the results of that I cannot prophesy, for lack of intimate experience with the speculum, with the mechanics and the secret movements of it, as it were."

So, during the balance of the hour, poor Davey was forced to contain himself, storming back and forth and quoting Gooeyduck at all and sundry.

Addleweed informed the poet that he was himself a patron of the arts, and at great length he discussed a project whereby he would endow some vast sum to maintain Coleridge and perhaps the Wordsworths too in opulence, provided only that they would cross the sea and take up residence in Massachusetts. Coleridge politely put him off, pleading his health, and giving other reasons. They discussed poets and poetry, politics and letters, until finally it became evident even to Addleweed that his host was getting tired. He stood up, repeated his invitation and his offer, bowed his good-bys, and finally took his leave, saying, "I trust I did not interfere with your labors, Mr. Coleridge?"

"No, no, pray don't concern yourself," replied the poet wearily. "I daresay that I'll recall the other stanzas, sir, when I get back to it."

Addleweed left, the door closed behind him, and slowly he strolled back to the outbuilding. Then he said, *"Enfold me!"* and was with us instantly.

It seemed to me singularly fitting that a Twentieth Century Professor of English Literature should have been the man to happen by and spoil Coleridge's remembrance of *Kubla Khan,* but I deemed it wiser not to comment on it, and Davey missed the point entirely. He did not even speak to Addleweed. He strode up to the speculum, now once more turgid. "Marlow, in Buckinghamshire, goddamn it! on Midsummer's Eve, 1769. In the courtyard of the best inn there, but where nobody can see!"

The stable yard took form before our eyes. There was no living thing in sight. With a final curse, Professor Davey stepped into it, and marched to the inn door, which he threw open. It was a low-ceilinged room, built in Elizabethan times, with huge glowering beams where shadows strove against each other, cast by candles and by the great fireplace where a fowl or two, a leg of lamb, and a vast joint of beef were spitted. Two or three countrymen sat at a table with their tankards, playing draughts; and at a long oaken table near the fire a group of gentry, deep in their cups and surrounded by the bottles with which they had contended, were arguing riotously.

"By God!" roared a booted

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hunting squire in bottle green. "I tell ye, Joranda *will* be at the Fair — may be there now, for all I know — with all her cov —"

"Hush, Will!" A smaller, older gentleman snapped out the words. "That's for us alone!" He was dressed modestly in brown, but his face, saturnine and hungry and implacable, was enough to strike silence into anyone.

"Well, Gypsy or no, she's a damned pretty witch, she is!" Will grumbled. "But you're right, Sir John, you're right. I'll say no more, but I will be with her tonight, Devil take me if I don't!" And he poured himself almost a pint of port.

In the meantime, the innkeeper, a displaced Irishman by the manner and the sound of him, and probably an ex-sergeant by his look, had greeted Davey favorably enough, asking him how his journey went — for was he not a stranger in these parts? — and would he eat and drink?

"I've dined," Davey grunted. "And wined too. But some sherry might do well to top it off with."

The innkeeper brought him a bottle and a glass and said, "And now there'll be the price of it, your Riverence, if you please."

We saw Davey's cheek redden; we watched him fumble in his pockets angrily; we realized that, in his rage, he'd never thought of money to take with him.

Addleweed chuckled maliciously. "Well, well!" he said. "I knew if I could only get him wild enough, he'd foul it up! Do you suppose he'll pop back out of there to borrow a few of old King George's shillings from us?"

But Davey had no intention of retreating.

"Well, sir," remarked the Irishman, "'tis a few pence only, and surely you'll be having that about you?"

"I haven't a goddamned penny on me!" shouted Davey, now tried beyond endurance. "And that's the bloody truth, and make the most of it." And taking up the bottle he began to pour.

The innkeeper reached out a big, hairy hand. "I cannot let you do that without paying, sir. Though you're a man of the cloth, still you are not from hereabouts. We do not know you, sir —" And he made as though to retrieve the bottle.

As I have said, Professor Davey was a well-made young man, with power in his solid body. With a tremendous oath, he brushed the hand aside. He brought the bottle down on the tabletop so hard that sherry spilled. "Damn your black Irish soul!" he roared. "I'll drink this bottle and pay you when I can! Do what you like about it — but if you try, I'll break the thing and ram it up that fat arse of yours!"

"Fantastic!" whispered Addle-

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weed. "He remember to say *arse* instead of *ass.*"

The Irishman, amazed by such behavior from a parson, gave way a step, obviously to recruit his energies. But by this time, the gentlemen across the room had become aware of what was going on. Several of them had risen to their feet so that they might see more clearly. One of them, red-faced, white-haired, and many years older than the rest, exclaimed, "Heigh-ho, me lads! Why, here we have a fighting cockerel of a starveling parson, right enough! Methinks he is a man after my own heart." Taking a coin from his pocket, he called out, "Paddy, my boy, give him what he wants." He tossed the coin. "Tonight, by God, we well may need a chaplain, and he'll be my guest! Pick up your glass and bottle, sir, and join us. I'm Thomas Cobleigh of Cobleigh Manor, hard by. What is your name?"

And Davey, as he walked across to them, gave us over his shoulder a look of utter scorn and pure triumph. He introduced himself. "I'm Peter Davey," he declared, "and it's true I am a stranger." He actually bowed slightly. "At least I am a stranger well received. I thank you, sir."

"By God, I didn't think he had it in him to be courteous," muttered Addleweed.

Davey's host and benefactor now presented his companions: Sir John Steward, whose wicked eyes were appraising the newcomer calculatingly; Mr. William Brewer; Peter Garney, a lean and leathery man meticulously dressed; Mr. Daniel Whidden, broad-shouldered and beetle-browed; and Mr. Harry Hawke, who — Cobleigh boasted — might be small, but "Damme! He could put a horse at any fence in England — aye, and over it!"

After Davey had proposed a toast to all of them, and they had drunk it, Sir John began to ask him questions: where was he from? and was he staying in the neighborhood? and had serious business of some sort brought him there?

Davey replied that he had spent twelve years in the town of New York, in the American Colonies, but there had been a little difficulty — he smiled at them evilly — involving the wife of a parishioner, and he had felt it wiser to depart.

"Unfrocked you, did they?" Sir John demanded, leaning forward slightly with a new interest.

Davey muttered unintelligibly, conveying the impression that he had indeed been unfrocked. There was a ripple of drunken laughter, and Will Brewer slapped him heartily on the back. Then the questioning resumed, and Davey hinted that he was staying with friends at Medmenham.

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"Who?" asked Sir John.

Davey hesitated for a moment only. "At Medmenham Abbey," he replied.

"How on earth did *he* ever hear of the Hell Fire Club?" whispered Addleweed. "Do you suppose he read a book? The idiot! It's lucky for him they don't have telephones!"

"I heard Sir Francis was at London?" Sir John's voice suddenly was icy.

"Certain of his friends are staying as his guests, and I am of their number. It was they who suggested I might find good entertainment here, sir, if someone would but introduce me to Tom Pierce."

"Devil take me, that is a trick Bubb Doddington would play!" exclaimed Peter Garney with a neighing laugh.

Davey smiled, but answered neither yes nor no.

"Did he also tell you," asked Sir John, "that Tom Pierce and Sir Francis are rivals in a way? Or that Tom has outdone him very neatly? Aye, there's nothing they do at the Abbey Tom's not done better — or perhaps I should say *worse.* For look you —" He again leaned forward, and his eyes stabbed at Davey like a knife — "at the abbey, it's all playacting, do you see? But what Tom has done at Direwolf Hall no man has dared to do since Dr. Dee — as you shall see, my not-so-reverend friend. We're going there directly, and we shall take you with us, if you will."

"D'you think it wise, Sir John?" grumbled Daniel Whidden. "After all, we do not know this man."

"God rot you, Whidden! Be done with carping at me. You know as well as I there's always a good use for any unfrocked parson at the Hall."

"Aye, aye," said Cobleigh. "Pierce will be glad enough to have him there. But are we going there indeed?"

Here Will Brewer again staggered to his feet. "Damned if we don't!" he shouted. "I tell ye, Joranda's at the fair at Widdicombe, the pretty witch — aye, she and all her tribe! And I shall lie with her tonight, d'you hear? And it'll be Tom Pierce shall fetch us there!"

"I fear you overrate Tom's powers, Will," Sir John said with a sneer. "Nothing can get you to Widdicombe this night!"

"I'll lay a thousand pound on it!" Brewer bellowed.

"Done!" said Sir John. "But how d'you think he'll manage it?"

And Davey looked at both of them, and said, "Perhaps with his gray mare?"

Instantly, there was utter silence in the room, a stillness where even the fire seemed frozen

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and no man moved. I, standing in my office before the speculum, knew the strangeness of it, and in my bones felt that dark doings would soon be afoot.

But laughter tore the silence into shreds. "Gray mare!" whinnied Peter Garney. "Namesake Davey, I warrant ye'll never see a mare the likes of her!" It seemed to be a joke between the lot of them. Will Brewer roared and spluttered; Harry Hawke chuckled; Whidden and old Tom Cobleigh rumbled and guffawed. Even Sir John Stewart smiled secretly. But the Irish innkeeper, and the rustics at their tankards, and the plump, blushing serving maid whom all of them that night had bussed and pinched, these did not laugh at all; instead they seemed to draw into themselves.

Now all the gentlemen were rising; Thomas Cobleigh was tossing money on the table to pay the reckoning. "Sir John and I," said he, "will take Parson Davey here with us in my coach. See that you don't fall off your horses, boys! We'll meet you there."

The stable yard was faintly moonlit, and the coach, its two feeble lamps flickering fitfully, was waiting there, its harness and its leathern springs creaking as the four horses shifted in their traces. Inside, it was completely dark, as though the vehicle, now moving forward, denied permission to all light to enter it. Occasionaly, a small shaft of moonlight, slipping by, would be reflected by a golden button, by a sword hilt, by the wild whites of Sir John Stewart's eyes; but usually his voice reached us out of darkness.

He told the history of the hall and of its owners, not leaving out the present tenant, describing it as a cold, towering grimness of gray stone, raised through the generations over and around the ancient walls of Direwolf Priory where, in the Twelfth Century, the abbot and all but seven of his monks had suffered at the stake for having sold their souls to Satan, practicing Black Magic and the like. It was a history of murders and betrayals, plots, cruelties, bitter tears, and unclean deeds, and its narrator seemed very proud of it. "There's been nothing like that at the abbey, I assure you, sir — whatever Dashwood and his friends may say; and since Tom's restored the old friary chapel, and refurnished it, and dedicated it again — well, tonight you'll see!"

The coach turned off the road, clattering at a good stiff trot down a tree-shadowed avenue — and there the hall loomed, vast and ominous. The horsemen, who'd passed by on the road at a drunken gallop and shouting wildly, were already there; and together they knocked at the

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forbidding door. Two servants opened it, huge, dull-eyed men in a black livery, and beckoned to them silently to follow, and the door closed to behind them. In wall sconces and in chandeliers candles guttered, but there was darkness everywhere. Dark pictures stared from darkness-haunted walls. Dark suits of armor were on silent guard at every turn. They passed through the great hall, where among the roof beams, in a chill updraft, dark banners beat their long-neglected wings. Then one of the servitors unlocked a mighty portal in the wall, and they went down a stone passageway, down worn stone steps, to a final door. The servants threw it open, but did not go in. Sir John leading the way, they filed through.

I saw that they were in the chapel of the friary, long dead, long buried, long forgotten — now brought once more alive. There were no stained glass windows here, no symbols of the Resurrection and the Life, but Christ Crucified hung upside down behind the black stone alter, on which a naked woman lay — a woman young and very beautiful, but with vile eyes. Black tapers burned in their branched candlesticks. High on the dark wall, a hideously horned head glared down, and on a votive table before the altar, a book reposed — a tall, narrow folio bound in alum-tanned pigskin and clasped with iron. And there Tom Pierce stood, wearing the black habit of a monk, its hood thrown back to show his shaven head, and his once-handsome pockmarked, ravaged face. Now he came forward, towering over all of them, and his eyes were terrible pools of emptiness. And it was plain that he too was very, very drunk.

"Brethren," his heavy voice rasped out, "I was told that you would come, a stranger with you. Who is he?"

"Lord Abbot," replied Sir John, with something very like fear in his voice, "he is an unfrocked priest and a friend of Francis Dashwood's and Doddington's, who sent him to us. Peter Davey is his name. He is one of us."

Pierce looked Davey up and down, and through and through. "Belike he is," said he. "Soon enough we'll know."

As the rest advanced, Davey purposely had lagged behind; now he turned his head and, under his breath, spoke to the speculum. "Okay, Addleweed, you fink! Here it is — a lot of drunken slobs with too much money playing Dracula! Next we'll be marching to the stables to meet the mare!"

Then he felt Pierce's eyes on him and rejoined the rest. Will Brewer, his arms around the false monk's shoulders, was telling of his

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wager and of his determination to be in Widdicombe that night to lie again with Joranda. "She'll have her coven with her," he declared. "More than enough for the whole lot of us! John here still says you can't get us there, but I, by everything unholy, declare you can!"

"A few days since," declared Pierce, "Brother John would have been right indeed. But doors have opened for me. There's much I've learned. Now I have *powers* —" And he laughed mirthlessly as he pronounced the word — "which can take us all to Widdicombe while you blink an eye. Yes, or to the moon did we wish to go there. Or into hell itself!"

He opened the tall book. "Do ye all wish to go?" he asked of them.

They answered that they did.

He asked them once, and twice again, and they gave him the same reply.

"Very well, then," he said. "We'll waste no time with the Mass and all such flummery." He gestured to the girl, who climbed down, and donned a nun's habit lying by the altar. "I shall command the one who'll bear us there!"

Then, carrying the book, he began walking withershins around the pentacle, chanting in a strange and ugly tongue.

My own fears had been mounting. Now I turned to Shagreen. "Those people are *not* playing!" I exclaimed. "Or if they are, it's a damned dangerous game. Isn't there *some* way to get him out of there?"

"None, none at all, truly," moaned Shagreen.

Clinging to him, Miss Kornmulder quivered with excitement. "Hey!" she chattered. "Talk about your Gothics! This is just the *greatest!*"

Pierce had thrown the black hood forward over his head. His voice was swelling now, and in among the unknown words I began recognizing names — names which never should be thought, let alone cried aloud. His tone had been almost one of pleading. Now it was changed to one of savage, absolute command. Finally he repeated one name three times, so that the chapel echoed and reechoed with his voice, his mouth writhing in a smile so cruel that he no longer appeared human.

The echoes died away, but the name seemed to linger there, over them.

And it was then that Davey spoke to him. "Er — Lord Abbot," he began, "pardon my interrupting, but before the night is too far gone, could I see your gray mare? They tell me she's —"

Abruptly, Tom Pierce turned about. Within the black shroud of

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his habit, he seemed almost literally to *grow*. *"Gray mare?"* he screamed. "Man, are ye daft? Or are ye as simple as the country folk? It's no horse of this world that'll bear us all to Widdecombe!" He lifted high the open book. *"It is my grimoire!"*

Then once more he cried the name and said in clear English, *"I order you!"* and spoke a Word of Power which I had heard about but never seen in print.

What happened then occurred so swiftly that, later, none of us could quite agree on it. A cloud was there, between them above the pentacle, pitch black and fraught with forces unrestrained — and it had features amorphous in their hideousness and horror, and it had eyes. It filled the chapel instantly. We heard a desperate, pitiful *"Enfol —"* from Davey's lips.

Then suddenly there was an implosion of the air around us through the speculum — and the material of the speculum was no longer there. The bronze ring stood before us, a vagrant curl of smoke wreathing from it, and the strong smell of brimstone — and through the ring there was nothing but my office to be seen.

It was some time, I assure you, before we could recover enough of our equanimity even to leave the office and lock it up behind us. I, an authority on sorcery, should perhaps not have been affected; instead, I felt as Einstein must have felt when he first read of Hiroshima. What I had seen left me terror-stricken. Poor Addleweed was in a thorough panic, and it was all that we could do eventually to get him changed and on his way. Mr. Shagreen was not so much shocked and horrified as plunged into despair by the destruction of the instrument on which he had lavished so much time and effort. As for Miss Kornmulder, her one regret was that the show ended without the promise of a next installment.

However, ultimately things really worked out for the best. We all agreed that it would be much wiser to keep the happenings of the evening completely to ourselves. Professor Addleweed, knowing now that his theory and not Davey's had been right, decided that he would do the necessary research to prove that dabbling in Black Magic had indeed caused the demise of the Brethren of Direwolf Hall, and I was able to get him a very generous two-year grant from the Hober Murrain Twitchett Memorial Endowment to take him back to England for that purpose — which made life easier for him, because Davey's campus followers were bruiting it about that Addleweed had made away with him.

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Not only was Professor Addleweed clearly the winner in the controversy, but scarcely a week after Davey's disappearance, the N.A.A.C.P. revealed, after a careful investigation, that Gooeyduck was actually neither American nor black, but an illegal immigrant from Syria, with an Afro wig, a genuine talent for mimicking accents, and a keen eye for a soft touch.

In his distress, Mr. Shagreen stayed away from my office for three days, solacing himself with Willa Kornmulder, who had asked for leave. Then he returned suddenly, his spirits quite restored. He had received a letter from his *guru,* who had informed him that the Maharajah of Jehazpore, once the greatest of the Native Princes and still the world's richest man, wished to support him in his studies and had offered facilities and rewards beyond his wildest dreams.

"I really do not want to leave you, dear Grumps," he told me fondly. "Indeed I do not, for haven't we had such great fun together? But His Highness thinks that perhaps, with the assistance of the speculum, which I shall make haste to recreate, he can improve the desperate lot of India, for now the poor land is ruled by all sorts of self-seeking politicians and — as he puts it — by the ghost of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, God rest her soul!"

I agreed with him that this was a goal worthy of his talents, and with considerable relief, I must admit, drove them — for Willa Kornmulder was going with him — to the airport. There we parted, she kissing me a moist good-by and telling me a little vaguely that she just couldn't wait to get there and be an *houri.*

Now ten months have passed. Occasionally I have had letters from Shagreen telling me of his progress, and how His Highness had instructed him to take those measures in the past which would bring again the civilized and prosperous days of the British Raj, when the Princes were all secure on their thrones and in their incomes, and how pleased His Highness now was with his efforts, and how he had just been made Grand Vizier, or Prime Minister.

I am really happy for him, for I'm sure it's all quite true. This morning in the paper I read that His Majesty Charles III, the King-Emperor, has proclaimed a Royal Durbar to be held in New Delhi — the first, I understand, in many years.

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Some insights on cats — both pure bred and mongrel — from a long-time F&SF contributor who now has two cats and has trouble keeping his vow never to take on another. Soon to be published books by Mr. Leiber include *The Book of Fritz Leiber* (DAW) and *The Best of Fritz Leiber* (Ballantine).

Cat Three

FRITZ LEIBER

Skinny old Miss Skipsy kept and cherished three cats in her sixth-floor apartment, and their names were Cleopatra, Caesar and Mark Antony. She had heard of those plays written by Elizabeth Taylor and Claude Rains and Richard Burton. Or maybe those were the actors. She wasn't sure. Miss Skipsy wasn't sure about a lot of things, but about others she was devilishly certain — and frequently accurate.

Cleopatra and Caesar were seal point Siamese of the highest breed. They auraed the royal presence. They could readily have been exhibited at cat shows, but Miss Skipsy, who was basically an aristocrat and took for granted all cats were the same, never chose to do so.

Mark Antony was an alley cat of very dubious extraction. He looked most like a blue-cream American shorthair but was obviously impossibly mongrel by at least eighty points. He was *very* short-haired — "You went and got a crew cut again, Tony," Miss Skipsy used to reproach him lazily as she stroked his head — and he was one of the very few of the many cats whom Miss Skipsy had rescued from the foul streets and then taken to her skinny — truly, nonexistent — bosom. When a lady gets to her age, her womb and bosom both disappear, unless she be an inveterate hormones and silicone enthusiast.

Miss Skipsy was 78 and still a speed typist — 137 words a minute for court stenographers who welcomed her deadly ability — and also able to make friends with all

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sorts of new people she met and be a Little Mother of All the World. She rescued loose or runaway dogs, horses, pigeons, and sea gulls (from whom she most carefully and with a great deal of medical know-how washed off the leaked crude oil that had driven them ashore), and of course she also rescued very many cats, and also men and women and marmosets, and other breeds of being. She would happily have rescued lions and tigers if given opportunity. Once she almost rescued a very neurotic black panther, used in the rites of some fearfully careless devil worshipers, but the police and their dreadful guns beat her by half a block.

She found homes for her foundlings amongst her friends, new acquaintances, and any decent-seeming persons she could browbeat into taking on an animal. Naturally she would never call the pound or the SPCA or any organization which would just kill them off after a brief period of offering them to some unknown person who wanted an unknown pet animal. She would rather have abandoned them in the big park by the seaside. But she always found homes for "her people," one way or another. (That was why she had to be a very speedy speed typist indeed, to finance her animal savings.)

She may even have rescued lost space folk, for all we know from her brief memoirs and the obscure biogs of others — space people whose crafts had crashed and the like, the "Little Green Men" and all the others, including the ones that look and make sounds like Terran people and animals. She would have nursed them and when they got well released them in their own custody or shunted them off to her animal-loving friends or perhaps even tried to help them finance the repair or rebuilding of their spaceship, according to what they wanted and she thought best. It is a matter for deep speculation.

As we can certainly gather from the foregoing, Miss Skipsy was a bit of an authoritarian, but a loving and well-meaning one. She would mildly bawl out Caesar for biting by the slack of the neck and trying to rape his mother Cleopatra — he really should have been called Caesarean — with Mark Antony interestedly looking on. Nothing would ever have "happened" in the sense of impregnation or even intercourse, because Cleo and Caesar had long since been neutered, an act for which Miss Skipsy alternately castigated and praised herself.

At least it was a step against a cat population explosion, and we do have about 22 million domestic cats in the USA. And for that matter many humans are allowing

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and even encouraging the explosion of many populations, including their own. But here I get too close to the language of Miss Skipsy, who strictly believed in neutering male and female cats — and humans too, after the woman had borne two children, or else the male had been cited even once in a paternity suit.

Not a bad idea — Malthus and Heinlein can't *always* be right.

So we have the three cats who live in their one-room-plus bath apartment. Cleopatra, who was 16 years old, older than Miss Skipsy, comparatively, rheumy-eyed and shedding seal point hairs like mad. Mark Antony took to grooming her regularly, which Miss Skipsy was too busy, and Caesar too crazy to do except upon occasion, and it kept down Cleo's hairballs and asthmatic coughing.

Caesar, cross-eyed, mad-masked, and wild. Cleo the crone. And Mark Antony, watching them both and making up to Miss Skipsy. He was the most empathetic of the cats, with the greatest insight into their, and even his own, behavior. He also had a diet problem. He refused the chopped kidney and dry food Miss Skipsy gave Cleo and Caesar and took only liquid food from Miss Skipsy. Breast milk — no, of course, but Miss Skipsy secretly mixed vitamins, liver extracts, and protein powders into the liquid foods he favored. Sometimes he tasted them and gave her a reproachful glance, yet kept on lapping.

Antony had a constant eye on Caesar, but who could tell what that meant?

Caesar had never been out of the room in which he had been born except for brief scampers down the corridor toward the elevator. He believed that the room was the Cosmos — with a tiny and mysterious connection to infinity, the Corridor. He also frequently looked out the big window, which was French type and swung. Miss Skipsy kept it tied about three inches open with an old bandeau which she had worn when she was a champion tennis player. Caesar thought all outside there was a weird part of his brain. But where did those birds come from? Frightening, even to a cat, to have birds in one's belfry.

Cleo knew it wasn't imaginary because she had her childhood memories of life in gardens. While Antony knew it very well because of his alley cat life. But Caesar really believed it — that eternity and immortality (and flight! — and all the other imagining of his crook-eyed brain) were just outside the window, sixth floor.

Miss Skipsy loved them all. She talked to all three of them — wild insights with Caesar, mild Hindi conclusions with Cleo, and rather

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drier ideas with Antony, who was an extremely logical cat, providing logic agreed with what he wanted. She loved all of them — they were her family, as opposed to the people she merely loved and helped.

She was a great gal. She devoted five days a week to loving two- and four-legged people with almost telepathic empathy and one secret hour to hating them, and 47 hours to feeling guilty.

But by a shade Antony had the better telepathy. He knew Caesar was fringe-psychotic and was very much interested in him for that reason. He knew Cleo was fringe-senile — and treasured her for that reason. He knew Miss Skipsy had the cat equivalent of a very high IQ, and he was very pleased with her for that reason.

Empathy in cats — particularly the intense empathy that goes with ESP — is quite a problem. To start with, they don't even like each other so much. Oh, they are attracted to and make use of each other, and they admire each other endlessly, as they do all beauty. But empathy deep and true between them? Rare.

So, naturally, empathy between a cat and a human, a horse, a dog, a soft-spoken extraterrestrial, or any other creature is rarer still, taking at least as much patience and skill as manning a falcon. Naturally, most sane cats will give polite thanks when a food offering is made. They prefer the finest peoplefood; next, the best catfood; but they will eat stinking fish if absolutely necessary — though a few pampered and irrealistic blue bloods dragged down to such a situation would rather starve.

As for inanimate objects, absolutely no empathy whatsoever! Though especially if it be of an interestingly pleasant texture, they will *admire* such an object as much as they admire any beautiful being, or — almost — a goddess. But if it doesn't strike their sense of beauty, they will take even less notice of it than a king does of a beggar.

This is one of the reasons cats expect cars to get out of their way when they stride across the street, which quite a few cars don't. The soul of a car is tiny and hidden in a deep, dark and malodorous place.

In this, cats are like their chief goddess Bast, although neither the cat nor the goddess knows this, at least at gut level. Crossing a modern boulevard, Bast would have her corporeal form destroyed not seven but a thousand times.

No, cats expect all cars, from Rolls-Royces to Fords to trucks, to get out of their way — they never even attack cars like dogs, cars being beneath contempt — and if they don't step fast, they generally get it, except if they encounter a cat-fond motorist, who will risk a

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dangerous accident rather than killing one of the divine dears.

Cats have a collective subconscious, as posited by Carl Jung for man, going back to the saber-toothed tiger at least, and culminating in the glorious day when a short-haired, yellow-and-brown-striped Kaffir cat first strode into a neat primitive Egyptian village and said, in effect, "Here I am. I catch rats and mice. I'm friendly if treated with courtesy. Gimme some meat or milk."

Oh yes, cats remember all that, as you can see from their slitted, ever-watchful eyes. Way back to Egypt and well beyond — to the day when felines decided, partly because of their short intestines, almost incapable of assimilating a vegetarian diet, to eat the blood and flesh of their own mammalian kind, a deed that has made them criminals forever and ever, though of course they were just getting into the cat race, usually named after a more malodorous mammal.

Cats mostly just pretend to love humans, but if there's one thing they really love, it's gardens. They like to brush against flowers rather than weeds. They have fine taste.

But most cats also have claustrophilia. They will stay in one room endlessly — as Caesar, not even demanding a private garden. Or if shut in a dressing drawer, especially one with nice clean sweet linen or silk to lie on, they will recline there for hours and hours without a cry. Maybe they are the first people of the Black or Dark World, loving it all the time. But perhaps fresh linen is what cats love most. I have seen two enemy cats lie closely side by side on a freshly washed, nubbly bedspread.

So for them durance vile is not so vile, provided it is velvet-lined.

Antony, because of his alley cat peculiarities, got his liquid food anywhere in the house he wanted it, which was a nice attention from Miss Skipsy. She was a good and convivial girl.

Antony got to watching Caesar more and more. He had a cat-scientific curiosity. And Caesar, being a crazy character, was basically interesting. So Antony watched. Actually the Siamese Caesar spooked him and made his collective subconscious go back to the late Middle Ages when they were apt to kill any cat as a witch's familiar. Brr!

Caesar was really a crazy cat. For instance, he ignored his bowl of dry cat food and did great thieving operations to get and open the box of this same dry cat food three shelves up in the kitchen cupboard. Truly a cat burglar. Antony would willingly have joined him in his nefarious activities, but there was no profit to him in them, and

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Caesar would have resented it deeply and perhaps dangerously.

Caesar used to watch from the window at the world he believed to be part of his own brain. But only by day.

Miss Skipsy had very dark drapes and kept them closely drawn all through the night. The three cats enjoyed that too — Caesar because then he could stop watching his own mind outside the window and go to sleep.

Antony, the short-haired mongrel, kept smelling Caesar by night and watching him by day.

Antony had rather human habits, which somewhat pleased Miss Skipsy, such as avoiding the sandbox and sitting carefully on the edge of the toilet "to do his business." Perhaps an earlier owner had trained him in this action before his alley-catting days.

The reason Miss Skipsy served Antony anywhere in the apartment was because he was so meticulous in lapping up his liquid foods, without spilling a drop, while Caesar and Cleo ate in the bathroom.

Despite Caesar's skill in getting at filched dry cat food (he chewed off the corners of the cardboard boxes), he couldn't for all his genius, open tin cans. Impossible unless someone opens a cat factory where steel mittens are made to fit claws and paws.

Antony kept on watching Caesar as Caesar kept watch on the hallucinatory but dreadfully real and tempting birds, birds that seemed (in his brain- or apartment-Cosmos) to be flying nearer and nearer to Miss Skipsy's window, sometimes so close he couldn't resist mewing invitingly, or starting backwards with a snarl, or even leaping suddenly at the glass — which repulsed him. Antony saw in all this behavior evidence of ambivalence and a growing psychosis, though he lacked sufficient insight to realize that, to Caesar, everything outside the window was happening in Caesar's mind. Antony became madly curious as to how it would all end, and now *his* bad side came out.

One afternoon when Miss Skipsy was out and the birds were wheeling noisily close in the hot sunlight, Antony with heartless alley cat impulse and cunning clipped through the bandeau which kept the window open its cat-proof three inches. The window swung wide.

Caesar leaped for a passing bird — and violently out into the yawning space. He missed the bird, but cat reflexes taking over instantly, he landed lightly on the sanded tar of the opposite roof seven feet beyond the window sill. Two hours later Miss Skipsy came, saw, and rescued him, then

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attended to a darker and bloodier matter, involving an unpleasant session with the police, from which she emerged victorious.

It was really too bad about Antony. In leaping to rescue Caesar, or perhaps merely *imitate* Caesar's escape, he fell short and was smashed on the cement six floors below.

Poor Antony! He had tripped on the old hairbrush with which he groomed Cleo and also on the screwdriver, half vodka and half orange juice, he had been drinking. Also, his mass was about that of a jaguar rather than a house cat, and so instead of walking away like an ant from his fall, or limping away like a mouse, or conceivably recovering like a house cat, he was smashed — fortunately skull-first, so that he died almost instantly.

While falling, he had time to scream unheard: "Idiot! Drunken sponger!"

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The Fellowship of the Hand
By Edward D. Hoch

He was a slender man with nondescript features except for an odd tattooed design on his left cheek.

She blushed prettily.

He scanned the words quickly. *"Computer engineer Harry Rogers slain in office. Unknown man hunted."*
"Rogers?" he looked up quizically.

Masha was fearful of Stevro at first. He was a bulky, jerky sort of a man, with a habit of smoking soilweed, a synthetic, mind-expanding drug much used in the Near East. Gazing down at Masha as she sat on the edge of the bed that first night, he said, "You are very beautiful, my dear. Very beautiful, indeed."

He started out of the bed, but it was already too late. Three men, masked and carrying stunners, crowded into the bedroom. "Don't move," the leader barked, pointing his weapon at Jazine's groin,* or you won't live to enjoy that!"

Jason Blunt took his drink and seemed to study the amber liquor.

At its *best*, this very bad book has a very faint flavor of having

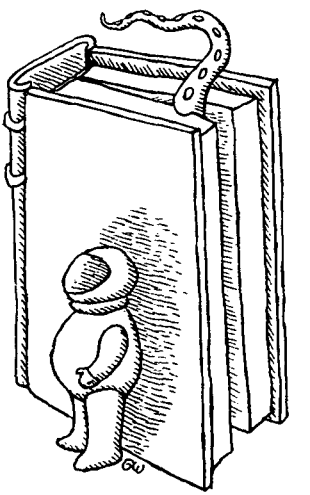
**For aficionados of this abominable euphemism I will point out that anyone who has two thighs has two groins.*

AVRAM DAVIDSON
Books

The Fellowship of the Hand by Edward D. Hoch, Walker, $5.95

Country Love and Poison Rain by Peter Tate, Doubleday, $5.95

The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume Two A and Volume Two B, edited by Ben Bova, Doubleday, $9.95 each volume



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been written by someone who has taken Ron Goulart's take-offs seriously. Like this one:

> Frost unrolled a dimension map. "This is the shortest route to the airport. You follow along. A couple of the boys will be waiting here to laser the tires. I'll be above, in a rocketcopter, to handle the rest."
>
> She blushed prettily.

But such dividends as *a couple of the boys* are rare. The back cover flap has a picture of the author, wearing what seems to be a painful smile, as though the effort of writing the book had been severe. (As it probably *had.* Coining all those futuristic terms, such as *soilweed, stunners,* and *rocket-copters.*) I know the effort of reading it was severe. Walker & Co., seem to be running out of science fiction authors to author their science fiction — and, in consequence, have been falling back on earnest experts in other fields of fiction. One recent exemplum from the Walker Works, by "'a reigning queen of the gothics,'" had to be seen to be disbelieved. For my part, I find it almost impossible to credit that the author of *The Fellowship of the Hand* has actually won the Mystery Writers of America Edgar award, a prize which I hold in high respect.

> After HAND (Humans Against Neuter Domination)'s raid on the Federal Medical Center I went into hiding. There were still a few of us left, but with Graham Axman sentenced to a long prison term we were like a body without its brain. I tried to take over, holding the group together, and before many months I discovered we had a foe every bit as deadly as the federal government and the Computer Cops.
> "Who would that be?" Jazine asked, his curiosity obviously aroused.

My curiosity is obviously aroused by the circumstance of such a bad book having such a good cover: Arresting jacket design by Enrico Scull. Photograph by Ray Miller.

If I say that after *The Fellowship of the Hand* almost anything would seem literate, I would be, I am afraid, perhaps unfair to *Country Love and Poison Rain.* Ah me. Onward. It is a sort of borderline science fiction, set in 1975, and could just as easily be labeled mystery, or political. Damn all labels. The scene is principally the Principality of Wales, entirely devoid of quaintness or mockery and almost entirely devoid of squalor. Reasonable attempts are made to tell something of the past and present of this richly ancient country and its official "capital" —

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"Cardiff, the cosmopolitan pretender that presumed to speak for a sacred nation" — but the attempts are extremely self-conscious and are not extremely effective. The novel is not atrocious, as was *Hand,* but curiously (or incuriously) resisted my sincere attempts to be very interested in it. And, if a shadow can lie heavily, then the shadow of Graham Greene lies very heavily on these pages indeed, cutting off the Cambrian sunlight, ah well.

The science in here is the science of chemical warfare; the villain here is the USA, imposing its deadly nerve gas upon NATO and any of its member-nations — in this case, the United Kingdom. The heroes, or, let us say, the Good Guys, are many, many: the British Representative to NATO, a Welsh Nationalist, a Welsh Communist, an American deserter fed up with chemical and other warfare (even though his mind had been presumably rotted by the devil drug "marijuana"), a brave young newspaperman, a clear-minded student. Imposed upon an understandable (whoopee) concern with the storage and movement of murderous vapors is a plot of such complexity as I haven't figured it out yet. It moves in lurches, somewhat like a badly-animated cartoon, and there are a very few effective scenes almost at the end.

Years ago I read in the *Herald-Tribune* (upon which be peace), a one-line anecdote about Dylan Thomas and Welsh Nationalism. Mr. Tate seems not to favor Welsh Nationalism; what he seems to favor is Welsh Marxism (about Marxism one hopes he may know more than he does about marijuana, sheest). With this in mind I'll here repeat the one-line anecdote, with an ellipsis entirely of my own devising:

"Dylan Thomas, asked his opinion of Welsh ---ism, replied in three words, two of which were 'Welsh --------ism.'"

I can feel the choke of the poison fume of nerve gas in my lungs, and I could wish this were a better book. Effective cover design by Lawrence Ratzkin.

I am not always much of a one-er for The Good Old Days, not being at all nostalgic for any period of time which I have lived through, myself, and which were really not all that Good, anyway. And anyway: are we to scorn all English spoke and writ since the days when King James's bishops translated the Bible, purely because English had — may one say — "peaked" at that point? — reached a particular point of ripeness, of successful self-discovery, not so reached

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since? No, I think we are not. (Mind you, be not absurd enough to think me absurd enough to compare the language of these books to the language of that Book: I did but seek a metaphor. And — eh? Anon, sir. Anon.) I owe it to Terry Carr for reminding us that it was Peter Scott Graham who first said that "The Golden Age of Science Fiction is thirteen." Still... except for H. G. Wells's "The Time Machine" (first published in 1895), and E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1928), all stories in the two volumes of The Science Fiction Hall of Fame were first published between 1938 and 1962: which will do for a Good Old enough Golden Age of SF until we can look back at a better one. (And I do not mean *four*teen.)

"What are the basic elements of Science Fiction, Pop?"

"Time and Space, my boy. Time and Space."

And, alas, neither time nor space will allow even partial coverage of the stories gathered here — and justly gathered — in these twain volumes and subentitled *The Greatest Science Fiction Novellas Of All Time/Chosen By The Members Of The Science Fiction Writers Of America* (and) *Edited By Ben Bova.* But it is certainly the duty of This Column to list, at least, the entire contents. Volume Two A has "Call Me Joe," Poul Anderson; "Who Goes There?" John W. Campbell, Jr. (as Don A. Stuart); Lester del Rey's "Nerves"; "The Marching Morons," C. M. Kornbluth; "Vintage Season," Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore (as Lawrence O'Donnell); "And Then There Were None," Eric Frank Frank Russell; "The Ballad of Lost C'mell," Cordwainer Smith; "Baby Is Three," Theodore Sturgeon; H. G. Well's "The Time Machine;" and Jack Williamson's "With Folded Hands." In Volume Two B: Isaac Asimov's "The Martian Way;" James Blish, "Earthman, Come Home;" "Rogue Moon," Algis Budrys; "The Spectre General," Theodore Cogswell; "The Machine Stops," E.M. Forster; "The Midas Plague," Frederik Pohl; "The Witches of Karres," James H. Schmitz; "E For Effort," T.L. Sherred; "In Hiding," Wilmar H. Shiras; "The Big Front Yard," Clifford D. Simak; "The Moon Moth," Jack Vance. Beautifully designed, printed, bound.

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"How's every little thing, Carter?"

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Without planning for it in any way, this anniversary issue seems to have evolved into a reunion of sorts, with the return to these pages of several writers — Reg Bretnor, Manly Wade Wellman and, here, Randall Garrett — whose distinctive work appeared in F&SF regularly in the 50's and 60's but less often than we'd like in more recent years. We think it has resulted in a lively and varied issue; Mr. Garrett's contribution is a fast-paced action sf piece, the sort we wish we saw more of these days.

Color Me Deadly

RANDALL GARRETT

The hiss and glare of the infrabeam, cutting through the moonlit darkness a few centimeters from my head, would have made me jerk aside if I hadn't been ready for it. The beam cut into an evergreen four meters behind me; the dark exploded off in a gout of steam and flame, filling the air with a heady, spicy gust of partially burnt, partially vaporized resin from the Monterey pine that the beam had slashed.

I stayed motionless behind my rock, wishing to hell I were somewhere else. My left cheek was warm and tingling from the side radiation of the beam.

If you've never seen any infrared laser beam more powerful than an ordinary handgun, you may be wondering about that flash of light and heat. IR is invisible and inaudible, as any fool knows. Sure. But what the fools don't take into account is that an infrared laser beam of sufficient power to cut through trees and melt stone throws out a devil of a lot more energy than a handgun.

A handgun can kill a man because the IR radiation, in a beam eight millimeters in diameter, chars the surface and cooks the flesh to a depth of better than twenty centimeters. But that doesn't take much power.

The beast that was firing at me was a semiportable projector, massing better than a hundred kilos, with all kinds of power behind it. The infrared coming out of the damned thing had enough joules pushing it to heat the air in

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its path to instant visibility.

And unless the men operating that semiportable had floaters on it — an unlikely possibility — they weren't going to be able to move it too quickly.

In the sudden darkness that followed the glare of the beam, I rolled away from my boulder to a clump of smaller rocks some four meters away. I just barely made it. The semiportable hissed and glared again, superheating the air and blazing off the boulder I had just deserted, splashing molten minerals all over the place. The rock cracked violently from the internal stresses caused by the sudden influx of unbearable heat.

The glare died, leaving only a floating fingernail of moon to illuminate the brush-filled landscape.

I rolled again. A second semiportable opened up almost immediately from a position some fifteen meters to the left of the first, slapping that boulder with another dose of high-energy heat radiation. They had had me spotted all right.

When the incandescence died, I rolled farther away. No need to be quiet; the rustling of my movements was drowned out by the splitting of breaking rock and the crackling of burning wood. It was a good thing that this was January and the rains had soaked the area; otherwise, Mission Canyon would soon be in a blaze that would threaten Santa Barbara and points south — maybe all the way to Los Angeles if those semiportables had kept smashing away in a summer forest. Los Padres National Forest was noted for its ability to blaze up dangerously if the season was right.

But the chuckleheads behind those heavy-duty lasers had thwarted themselves. They'd spotted me with an infrared detector and had then proceeded to make enough high-temperature radiation centers in the neighborhood to drown out my feeble output completely.

Yo, ho, ho. I lobbed half my grenades and my communicator over behind the boulder they were firing at. The communicator had a two-second time switch on it, and when it landed behind that nearly red-hot rock, it began screaming for help.

Of course, their own communicators picked it up, and this time, not one or two, but three semiportables hit it as one.

The boulder dissolved in a hellish splash of lava, and the grenades went off with a tremendous roar.

I felt the detonation, but I didn't see it; by that time I was rolling down a forty-five degree slope toward the bottom of the shallow gulch nearby, putting plenty of earth and rock between

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myself and the explosion. Even so, the supersonic vibrations of the shock wave from the polarized detonate was enough to addle my brain for a few seconds, and it must have really jarred my opponents.

The cold shock of the water running through the bottom of the ravine brought me out of my daze with a snap. Water at five degrees Celsius is not too comfortable as a bath, even if only your face and hands get it. The thermal waterproof coverall I was wearing protected the rest of my body.

I pushed myself erect and started slogging down the bed of Mission Creek toward Santa Barbara. I hadn't left any footprints getting away from my boulder, and I didn't intend to leave any now. The rocky bottom of Mission Creek was difficult to navigate, but I wouldn't have left much trace on it if it had been dry, and the icy water would wash away anything I left behind now.

I must have walked a full half kilometer before I began to feel the bruises that my roll down that rocky slope had imprinted on my body, but by the time I had precariously navigated the two-plus kilometers to where my own car was parked, I felt as though someone had massaged me, far from gently, with a couple of one-kolo single-jack hammers.

My car was still parked where I'd left it, on Foothill Road near the Mission. It didn't look as though it had been disturbed or even noticed, but I got out my instrument pack and stayed in the shadows while I checked for a trap, while the fingernail moon slowly settled toward the horizon.

The car they had traced me by was one I had stolen on San Roque Road earlier in the evening. I'd driven it up the old Lauro Canyon Road toward South Portal and abandoned it to give them a clue. Clues leading up the canyon, I needed; clues leading back down, I didn't.

Everything seemed clear. I moved quietly, keeping in the shadows of the now moonless night. The air was chilly, and a fog was blowing in, bringing with it the aroma of the Pacific coast — salt and dead sea-things from the beach.

I spent fifteen minutes circling in on the car, watching my instruments all the way except when I was eyeballing the terrain. Nothing. Safe as a stasis field.

Finally, I casually opened the door, climbed in, and hit the firing switch. Within five seconds, I had plenty of steam pressure; I eased her into gear and moved out. Nothing moved; nothing stirred; nothing showed on my detectors. I was off and away. I headed west toward U.S. Freeway 101.

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When I came to the on-ramp, I turned on the autoguide and let the Freeway Computer take over the control of the car. The FC took hold, and the car began moving north at a tightly controlled hundred-and-fifty kilometers per hour.

I moved over to the right-hand seat and started shucking my coveralls. They had been damned useful out in the cold, wet woods, but they might look freaky elsewhere — like an Eskimo in parka and mukluks strolling into an expensive Virgin Islands hotel.

I put on a comfortable, conservative, royal blue tunic-and-kilt business suit, turned on the TV to a music program, leaned back and went to sleep. I felt that I deserved it.

"...AND NOW THE NEWS! A SPECIAL BULLETIN FROM SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA, ISSUED BY THE..."

The voice woke me up. I turned down the volume a little. A glance at the trip indicator told me I was well past Paso Robles, which meant I'd been napping more than an hour.

The voice of the newscaster continued in a more subdued tone.

"...o'clock this evening in a stolen car which was spotted by alert Santa Barbara police. For the past two days, this California town has been the center of an intensive search by U.N. Special Forces, with the aid of Federal, state, and local police, trying to locate and apprehend the alien being who stepped out of the first interstellar ship to return to Earth just five days ago."

Apprehend! Ferddrech! They wanted to kill me, pure and simple.

"The alien fled into the forest just south of the Santa Ynez mountains. After abandoning his car, he kept going on foot, but he was finally surrounded. He was ordered to surrender, but he fired back and was killed during the fire fight that ensued."

The newsman's face was replaced by a shot of the landing pad at Vandenberg Spaceport, where the pinnace from the *Neil Armstrong* was still standing where I'd set it down five days before.

"When the alien stepped out of the landing craft, it apparently used some sort of device to jam the electronic circuits in the television cameras, and so there is no record of what it looked like. Even eyewitness accounts of its appearance vary so widely that no description of the alien is possible."

I got a small chuckle out of that line. I had been wondering what excuse they'd give for not even looking at me when I came out of the hatch.

"Official sources," the newsie blithered on, "state that at this

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time it is impossible to determine the exact location of the *Neil Armstrong.* It did not go into an Earth orbit when the pinnace dropped from it, and the satellite tracking stations can get no fix. One high official has expressed doubt that the interstellar ship from which the pinnace was launched was actually the *Neil Armstrong,* strongly suggesting that it might be an alien ship."

The rest of the newscast was the usual blah, but I watched it because I hadn't yet picked up all the little nuances in the differences between this world and the one I had left. Five days is not quite long enough for that much reorientation, even with an expanded mind.

When the newscast was over, I relaxed and went back to sleep.

The alarm roared in my ears, snapping me out of sleep almost instantly. I started to slap the cutout plate, then stopped. I wanted to hear the warning. Ahead, a hologram sign told me that I was approaching the Silver Avenue turnoff, which was the one I had programmed for. I was headed into the southern part of San Francisco.

The warning came. The speaker said: *"Warning One. You are approaching Silver Avenue, your programmed departure point from Speedway One Oh One. If you wish to reprogram, you have one minute from the signal tone. If not, you will be prepared to take manual control three minutes after the signal tone.* PING!"

I slapped the cutout plate just to show the computer that I was awake and functioning. No need to wait for Warning Two, which would tell me that if I didn't take over manual control when the signal came, I would be detoured into a detention lot, where a cop would give me a ticket for ignoring the warning.

I drove around until I spotted a phone kiosk. I parked the car and walked back to the kiosk. I fed the phone a couple of coins, punched the information number and waited for the light signal on the screen. When it came, I punched for "Dominguez" with the hope that the man I was looking for wasn't dead or simply gone from the area.

The list appeared on the screen. I looked for "Richard Heinrich" and found it. Had to be the same man; not many people named Dominguez with a pair of front handles like that. The phone number had changed, but the house address was the same.

I got my coins back, put them in again and punched the number — and put my hand over the vision pickup.

A voice said, "Dominguez residence." I recognized the voice.

"Sorry," I said. "Wrong

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number." I cut off and went back to my car.

Ten minutes' driving took me to the house on Folsom, on the south side of Bernal Hill, a plush residential district.

I parked the car half a block away and looked at the house. There were lights on, and I could see signs of movement through the heavy translucent panes of the windows. It seemed right; Dr. Dominguez was still up and lively at oh four hundred.

Well, hell, you cain't lose nothin' by tryin'.

I climbed out of the car, locked it and marched resolutely to the door of the house. I touched the announcer plate. After a moment, the most luscious — in fact, the *only* — blonde I had seen in years came on the screen in the door.

"Yes?" she asked sweetly.

"Would you tell Dr. Dominguez that Edward Chang would like to speak to him? He knew my father."

"One moment, Mr. Chang, I'll see." The screen blanked.

When it came on again, I got my first temporal displacement shock. Dominguez was still tough and hard-looking, and his eyes still had that sardonically humorous sparkle, but the lines in his face were more numerous and etched more deeply, and his handlebar mustache was gray. So were his sideburns. His eyes widened a trifle as he saw my face. "Edward Chang?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I understand you knew my father."

"You're Terry Chang's kid?" The smile came back to his eyes.

"Yes, sir."

"I'd have known," he said. "You're an absolute replica of Terry. Come on in."

The door clicked softly and swung open. I entered a short hallway which was decorated by the blonde I had seen on the screen. "Mr. Chang, come in," she said.

I had taken four paces forward when the voice behind me said, "Hold it, Mr. Chang. Don't move." I came to a neat military halt and clasped my hands behind my head.

"You have a nice voice, ma'am," I told the woman behind me. "I'll be real happy to obey any order you give."

"Did you notice that, Dorothy?" the voice said, ignoring me.

The blonde nodded curtly. "He began to come to a halt and raise his hands a fraction of a second *before* you spoke."

"Shucks, ma'am," I said, "that panel doesn't make *much* noise, but I heard it open."

"Interesting," said the voice. "Search him, Dorothy." Then, as the blonde came toward me, the voice added: "If you give Dorothy any trouble whatever, Mr. Chang, I will shoot you."

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Dorothy began checking my clothing and body thoroughly. By the time she was through, she had checked every place a human being could carry anything larger than a pen.

"He's clean, Clara," she said.

"Clara," I said, "you can put away the stun pistol now."

"What makes you think I couldn't have blasted you dead?" said the cool Clara.

I turned slowly around to face her. The stun pistol was at her side, not pointing at me. One does not traditionally expect stunning blue-eyed redheads to be cool and calm, but this one was.

"Because you don't sound or look stupid enough to allow Dorothy to get that near the target of a deadly weapon, and she doesn't sound or look stupid enough to risk it," I said.

She grinned suddenly. "All right, let's go up and see the doctor."

We went out of the corridor, turned right and went up a flight of stairs, single file all the way. Dorothy opened a door and stood aside. I walked on into Dominguez' study.

"Mr. Chang, Doctor," Clara said. "He's clean."

Dominguez, sitting behind eighteen square feet of jet-black desk top, grinned up at me, but his words were for Clara. "If he shares anything with his father besides an almost identical face, I wouldn't bet on that. Terrance Chang could conceal an umbrella in his umbilicus." Then, to me: "Are you clean, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"I believe you." To the girls: "Leave us, my ladies, we have things to mutter over, I think."

"But —" was all Clara got out.

"Go, *mi palomacita,*" he said gently, "and stand not upon the ceremony of thy going, but go."

They went.

Dr. Dominguez leaned back in his chair and looked up at me. He gestured. "Sit down, my boy, relax. Your father and I were great friends, you know. Care for a drink."

"I know. Yes, a Marguerita."

A big finger tapped a switch. "Margueritas," he said.

The room was big enough to be operational and small enough to be comfortable — six meters by ten, at a shrewd guess. There was the faint but unmistakable aroma of frankincense hanging about the pale-blue sound-absorbing walls.

"Your father," Dominguez said smoothly, "was one of the great heroes of his generation. I knew him well. However —" He made a casual gesture with his left hand. "— I never heard him mention a son."

"It was an unhappy liaison," I

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said. "Apparently, my father cared more for space than he did for my mother."

The blonde Dorothy brought in the drinks and retired silently.

"You have a good staff," I commented quietly.

He chuckled. "I thank you for the implied compliment, my boy, but curb your rampant imagination. Both of them are trained nurses; Clara also has an M.D. tacked after her name. She also happens to be my wife. Dorothy is my daughter by a previous marriage."

"I see," I said.

"Sure," he said blandly. "You remember Silverlocks."

Temporal displacement shock again, in spite of the training my nervous system had undergone. "Silverlocks?"

"Don't try to con an old con man, my boy," Dominguez said with a broad smile. "You haven't aged much, but I have the feeling you've changed more than I have in twenty years. But it hasn't been twenty years for you, has it?"

"Closer to five," I admitted. "I wasn't trying to con you; I was just being cautious. So platinum-blonde Baby Silverlocks has grown up to be golden-blonde Dorothy. I approve."

"Naturally." He leaned back in his chair and stroked his heavy mustache with a thick finger while he searched my eyes with his own. I caught a flicker of high-speed computing from his mind, but I didn't probe.

"I'm playing detective, Terry," he said after a moment. He grinned. "It's a fun-game. You are, of course, the mysterious alien that nobody can describe or get pics of — if I can believe the newscasts. And you're also very dead — again, if I can believe the newscasts. Deduction: I can believe part of the newscasts part of the time, but..." He turned a hand palm up, shrugged, and let the sentence hang.

"That's not a deduction, Don Ricardo," I told him. "That is a self-evident truth that has been basic to human knowledge ever since the early hominids invented speech. Try again."

"Spare me. I haven't matched wits with you for twenty years, remember. And it's been close to five for you, you say? How does that compute?"

"Eight years and nine months out at an average velocity of point nine-nine C. Ship time, one year and thirty-six days. Double that for the trip back and add the two and a half years we spent exploring the Sirius system. Those are rough figures, but I'm not going to quote the log to you."

"Many thanks; I'm a medicine man, not a spaceman. Now you will

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kindly explain to me why you and the nine other people who crewed the *Neil Armstrong* aren't enjoying parades and state dinners and medals and all the rest of that deadly hullabaloo? And don't tell me you are all modest."

I laughed. I had to. What I wanted to do was go to the south window and look out at the lights of the city of San Francisco and take a few minutes to recheck my decisions about how much to tell Dominguez — how much truth, how much lie, and how much silence. "It isn't modesty; it's caution." I stood up and walked slowly toward the window talking as I moved. "We found something...out there." Outside the window, bright Sirius hung low over the mountains to the south. I turned back to face Dominguez. "I came down to reconnoiter; the rest are waiting in the *Armstrong.*" I paused, then asked a sudden question. "How many interstellar expeditions have there been?"

"Three," he said. "The *Yuri Gagarin* left for Alpha Centauri twenty-nine years ago and hasn't been heard from since. Then your outfit headed for Sirius. Nine years ago, the *Martin Cooper* headed for Tau Ceti."

"And we're the first ones back. Right?"

"Sure. The Tau Ceti expedition hasn't even gotten there yet."

I sat down in the chair again. "Forget Tau Ceti," I said. "They don't even enter into the picture as far as I know. Besides, Tau Ceti is a hell of a long way from Alpha Centauri, but Sirius is only about ten light-years from Alpha Centauri."

Dominguez was looking at me with an expression of utter incomprehension, but he didn't ask any questions.

"I can't tell you everything, Don Ricardo; it would be too dangerous for both of us. You're going to have to take a hell of a lot on faith."

His dark gray-green eyes narrowed. "Sure. Faith. Now let's get back to Alpha Centauri. How does that tie in with your expedition?"

"We don't believe that we are the first expedition back," I told him. "We have reason to believe that the *Yuri Gagarin* returned to the Solar System about a dozen years ago. But the crew were not human — any more."

His face didn't change. "All right. I guess I can believe that. But if we on Earth haven't heard anything about the *Yuri Gagarin,* how did you get the news when you were damn near nine light-years away?"

"Would you believe telepathy?"

"Sure. I'll believe anything."

"Then you go ahead and believe telepathy," I told him.

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Dominguez reached over to his pipe rack and selected a pipe. "What is this 'something' you found out there?" he asked as he filled it.

"I can't tell you that, Rick, not yet."

He picked up a pipe lighter and applied the flame to the tobacco. Not until he had puffed the pipe into a satisfactory state of combustion was he ready to ask his next question. "Do you know where the *Yuri Gagarin* is right now?"

"Except that it is somewhere in the Solar System," I said, "and probably in an orbit somewhere between here and Mars, I haven't the least notion."

"Then where is the *Neil Armstrong?*"

"I can't tell you that," I said with a sigh.

He clamped down — not too hard — on his amber pipestem. "Terry," he said through his teeth, "just what the hell did you come to me for, anyway?"

"I need your help, Don Ricardo."

"Another question. How did you manage that trick when you climbed out of the landing craft? I mean the business of setting things up so that there were no photos and no description? How did you disguise yourself as a — a bug-eyed monster?"

"I didn't exactly," I said. "I'll tell you about that sometime, but now just now."

He rose — suddenly but smoothly — to his feet. A hundred twenty kilos of mass and a hundred and eighty-eight centimeters of height, he outmassed me by twenty kilos and topped me by ten centimeters. As someone had once said about him, "He looms awful heavy."

"You said you want me to help you," he said. "How?"

"Lend me about five thousand; give me that antique .44 Magnum of yours with fifty rounds of ammo; help me forge some papers so I can move around; and lend me either your wife or your daughter for forty-eight hours."

He stared down at me, eyes wide and then looked up at the ceiling. "Damn it, Terry, this is ridiculous! Twenty years ago, I could trust you implicitly. Down deep, God help me, I still do. But the logical, rational part of my mind tells me I'd better watch you like a Dakin cell watches a fusion generator."

"Go ahead and watch me," I said. I unlatched my tunic, let it drop to the deck and shucked my shirt.

He ignored me. "But you won't tell me anything; you hint at stuff you can't prove; you refuse to answer my questions. Frankly, this is the flakiest story I've heard since my grandmother told me that the

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way I came into this world was as a special worm in an agave plant. I grew up feeling I should have been a bottle of pulque."

I unbuckled my kilt, dropped it and slid out of my shorts. "Look at me and tell me I'm a liar," I said.

"I *am* looking at you," he growled, "and I don't think you're a liar." He continued his pacing. "I think I need more information before I go out on a damn fragile limb!"

I took off my socks and boots. "You can risk it if you keep your eye on me." I told him.

"Oh, I *will*, I *will*. But you can't —" He stopped, staring out the south window at Sirius. "How did you know that I still have that old .44 Magnum automatic?" he asked softly.

Stark naked I climbed up on top of his desk and assumed the lotus position. "You are too smart to lose it, too shrewd to allow it to be stolen, and you loved it too much to sell it. Conclusion: you still have it." I released him.

He swung around to face me. "Dammit, Terry —" He gave me a glass-eyed stare and gawped. "What the hell?" he asked weakly.

"You said you were watching me," I told him.

"I was. I did," he said, still flabbergasted.

I climbed down off the desk and started putting my clothes on. "You did not," I told him flatly. "You never looked at me once."

He sat down rather heavily in his chair. "How did you do that?" he asked.

"It's a little trick I learned out Sirius way. It's not telepathy; I'm not reading your mind or anything like that. Think of it as the brain sending out a message to other brains in the vicinity that gives them a subconscious urge to avoid looking at the person who's doing the broadcasting. You asked me how I 'disguised' myself as an alien. Well, that's it. No disguise necessary; nobody could describe me because nobody looked at me. The television men couldn't even focus their cameras on me."

"Now that I know about the effect," he said, "wouldn't it be possible to overcome it, to resist it?"

"Sure, you could stare straight at me, but you would become uncomfortable and embarrassed as if you were staring at someone with a disfigured face. Want to try it?"

"No. Later, maybe. Not now." He drummed four blunt, heavy fingertips on his desk for a moment. Then he said, "Terry, about the crew of the *Yuri Gagarin*. You said they aren't human any more. Are they dangerous? Where are they?"

"I think they're dangerous, and they're on Earth. They know I'm

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here, and they know I am as dangerous to them as they are to Earth. They may or may not think I'm dead, but I have to assume they don't. I'm going after them."

"And you want five thousand, a gun, some forged papers, and Clara."

"Or Dorothy."

"Clara. She's tougher, harder, more experienced. And I'm going with you."

I shook my head. "You're doing no such of a damn fool thing. You know too much. You'd radiate it all over the place. If you got within two meters of one of them, he'd have your skull picked dry in no time. It will be risky enough with Clara, but she won't know anything except the carefully concocted lies we feed her."

He was lighting his pipe again. "Then *they* do read minds?"

"And worse."

"Dammit!" he snapped, "the whole picture is as fuzzy as a wooly-bear caterpillar! I don't know a damn thing, and you tell me I know too much. Well, I'll tell you right now that I know better than to go in on any such vague scheme without further information!"

It took me three more hours to convince him that things had to be done my way, and I was afraid I had told him entirely too much by then. It couldn't be helped. No way.

During the next four days, Dominguez and I fought and talked in private, while he called me "son" in front of his wife and daughter.

I kept an eye on the newscasts. Even after the alleged death of the "alien," there was a lot of speculation about the fate of the *Neil Armstrong*. World Wide Television seemed particularly hot on chattering and blithering about the Sirius expedition. Not one word was said about the Alpha Centauri expedition, and only a few minor mentions of the Tau Ceti ship.

KWWT San Francisco even put on some twenty-year-old pics of the *Armstrong's* crew — including me, of course. But the only pic they had, evidently, was a bad one of me inside my space helmet. A few small changes in my face, and I'd be unrecognizable. Sure, I'd still look Oriental, but they couldn't go around trying to check every gentleman of the Chinese persuasion in San Francisco.

On the afternoon of the third day, I was sitting in a lounger, staring at a convenient wall, when Dorothy walked in with a glass of wine in each hand. Without tilting either glass, she crossed her lovely legs and flowed into a semilotus in front of me. I pulled my eyes down and looked at her. She held out one of the glasses.

"Charles Krug, Cabernet Sauvignon '24," she said softly.

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I took the glass wordlessly and tried a sip. It was marvelous and I told her so.

"I thought you might like it," she said, looking at me with her royal-blue eyes. "Chang, you have termites."

I must have blinked. "Termites?"

She gestured with the glass. "Termites. Something's eating your basic wood."

Languages change; we hadn't said it that way the last time that I was on Earth. But I understood.

"Nothing serious," I told her. "Just rolling things over."

She looked down at her glass. "Drek," she said. "Pure unadulterated drek. Talk to me." Those royal-blue eyes focused on me again. "If you don't let it go, it's *really* going to get under your bark."

There was a wave of temporal displacement again. Le#an had warned me about it, but Le#an couldn't cover everything. (The consonant I represent as a "#" has no counterpart, insofar as I know, in any human language. It's something between a uvular "R" and an English "TH" unsounded — with a lot of gurgling saliva.)

I remembered Dorothy as a baby. Six years ago. And now she was an adult, warm, human female. A generation's difference reduced to nothing.

She reached out suddenly and put her hand on mine. "Sorry, love. Can't you talk about it?"

I think I swallowed. I know my mouth had gone dry. "No. Not yet."

"Can you talk about *why* you can't talk about it?"

I pulled my hand out from under hers and stood up. "No," I said, "I can't." I walked over to the window and stared out at the night sky. Sirius hovered near the horizon. I hadn't realized it was so late.

All she said was: "Mind if I turn on the news, love?"

"No," I said without turning. "No. Of course not."

The voice came on quickly and smoothly. I didn't turn.

"*...in Zanzibar, following the death of an estimated forty persons today. The rioting was analyzed this morning by Dr. Ian Bruner at the London University Sociometric Studies Group...*"

Gug. Twenty years hadn't changed a damn thing. Human beings were still behaving like absolute idiots. Surrounded by a hostile Universe, they'd still rather kick each other's heads in than look at the Galaxy around them.

Out there, beyond the sky, were a thousand million stars. Other races — some older, some younger than man — were struggling to reach beyond the apparent sky that

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held them in. Earthmen had made three tries and given up. Back in the late Twentieth Century, they had done the same thing: a few trips to the moon and then — forget it. A half dozen robot ships to the outer planets and nothing else.

If it hadn't been for the Bending Converter, combined with the Sanders Field Scoop, no one would have thought of trying for the stars. And even so, after three tries, the fools had given up.

"...and tonight, an ultimatum by Baron Munreis, concerning the finances of Tunning Enterprises..."

Blither, blather, burble. Worse than children. Slightly overdeveloped animals. Maybe they weren't worth saving, but something had to be done to prevent the things of Alpha Centauri III from reaching the Sirian system.

I turned away from the window to look at the screen. Some sort of demonstration was taking place in Denver.

"...the Right Reverend Rabbi Israel Agmont said that he and Father Ettick will continue to establish commune congregations within the limits of the court order, but in Denver..."

The newscast went on, but I didn't pay any attention. The voices and sounds had become a flow of meaningless noise, and the picture had become a play of dancing, shifting shadow-and-light patterns of color. Somewhere in there, Doc Dominguez came in the room, but I paid no attention to him, either. He said something that I don't remember. He was still talking when my eyes closed.

"Wake up, Terry. Wake up, love." The voice was soft.

Something warm and gentle was caressing my cheek.

"Come on now, wake up."

I eased my eyes open. Dorothy was stroking my cheek with her fingertips. I had never been awakened so delightfully before.

The TV wallplate was dead, and the lights had been turned down low. "Sorry," I said. "I must have dozed off."

"Yes. I let you sleep awhile."

Her mouth was so close to mine that my reaction was almost automatic. I put my palms to her cheeks, brought her head forward and kissed her. Her co-operation was enthusiastic and profound.

Minutes later, she said, "Come on now, love. It's time to go to bed."

I got very little sleep that night.

When I woke up, the sun was glaring brightly through the bedroom window. I winced, then rolled over to look at the clock.

1150. Yeeps!

I got up and headed for the fresher in a sleep-dazed fog.

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It wasn't until I was relaxing in the warm dryer that memory came flooding back. I stomped out, got dressed fast, and went downstairs to Dominguez' study. He wasn't there, naturally; he was down on the ground floor, where the lab and office were, looking at patients. So were Clara and Dorothy. Business as usual. Crap.

I went into the study and started checking through his reference books. There were several hundred books lining the walls, but the sections weren't labeled, and I had to search for the psych books.

It was a book I'd never heard of before, since it was only five years old, according to the copyright date, but I knew immediately that it was the book I wanted.

Sex Magick and the Mind, by J. D. Klees, M.D., Ph.D., Pn.Ch.

There was a bookmark in it, and so I flipped it open to the marked page. On the bookmark was written:

Old pal, your ingenuity should have led you to this book. The section you seek begins on this page. Good luck. RHD.

My emotional level at that point was at a slow seethe. But I read the five pertinent pages.

Dominguez came into the study at precisely 1230 hours. I was still on low simmer. He was carrying a tray with food on it.

"Time to eat, my boy. Never get mad on an empty stomach, son; it upsets the metabolic processes and ruins your digestion."

"I don't like anyone stirring around in my mind," I said as coldly as I could. "I don't like anybody taking things out of it or putting things in — except me."

"Then get mad at the Sirians, not me." He put my breakfast on a corner of the desk and took his own lunch around to the other side so he could sit in his chair.

After a sip of hot coffee, he looked at me and said, "Now let's get one thing straight, son. I didn't take anything out of your mind. Nothing. Not even information. Do you know what happened?"

"You mean about last night?"

"Certainly, last night. Before and during the newscast."

"Well, I was talking to Dorothy. She asked if she could turn on the news. I said sure, why not. I began to get a sort of detached feeling — as though I wasn't part of the human race, just an observer. It was as though I were floating face-down on the surface of a clear sea, moving up and down on gentle swells, watching the queer creatures on the bottom."

Dominguez nodded with a definitely satisfied air. "Ee-yup. Exactly. I saw you and got a hunch. I went downstairs and eavesdropped on your alpha waves. You, son, were in a state of acute

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meditation. I unashamedly took advantage of it."

I gestured toward the bookcase. "With magick?"

"Call it magick. Call if psionics. Call it superhypnotism. You may call it Ermintrude, if you wish. I don't know what you learned out Sirius way, but you might be surprised to learn that we poor simple humans have learned a lot about our own minds in the past twenty years. Do you know what pulled your mind out of contact?"

"Sure," I told him. "Dorothy sensed that I had something on my mind and wanted me to talk about it. I told her I couldn't. Then she said, 'Can you talk about *why* you can't talk about?' And I couldn't do that, either. So I got to wondering why I couldn't talk about why I couldn't talk about..."

"Can you talk about it now?"

"I think so. Apparently Le#an was a little too cautious."

He blinked. "Who?"

"Le#an. Our — uh — mentor on Do*ar."

Dominguez grinned. "That sounds cute. Do*ar. With a Bantu click, yet." His face faded. "Planet, I assume."

"Only habitable planet Sirius has — if you don't mind a summer temperature of one-ten Celsius in the tropic zone and a UV input that'll give you second-degree burns in four minutes."

"And what does this Leg*ch*an —" He gave it a Germanic *ch*.

"*Le#an,*" I corrected him. "But you're close."

"What does he look like?"

"Humanoid," I said. "That is, if you consider a being that looks like a hairless cross between a chimpanzee and an aardvark to be humanoid."

"As a physician," he said, "I wish I had him here for a physical checkup. Him? Was it a him?"

I swallowed an egg-and-bacon mouthful and said, "No. It ain't a him, it's a her. Le#an is of the child-bearing gender."

"Pray tell me more about these Do*arians, dear boy."

"Physically? Aside from the fact that they range between a hundred and ten and a hundred and forty centimeters in height, have a body temperature of fifty-seven point three degrees Celsius, and have fire-engine-red skin, I can't tell you much. I didn't perform any autopsies."

"Pity," he murmured. "Tell me the rest of it."

"Only the important parts," I told him. I paused. "Can you imagine a meaner, tougher, more aggressive, nastier race of beings than the human race."

"With difficulty, yes."

"Very well, add on to that a total disregard for any other life form. Think of a race of beings that

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actively hates any other form of life that displays what we call intelligence."

Dominguez was stoking up his pipe. "Sounds human to me. Remember when you were in school and every stupid clod who knew that you were brighter than he wanted to kick your head in? Remember the people who wanted to kill off the dolphin and the sea otter, just because they displayed something approaching human intelligence?"

"All right. Just consider them human beings cranked up a couple of notches nastier."

"You're not talking about the Do*arians, now, are you?" he asked.

"No, fughead, of course I'm not. I'm talking about those bastards from Alpha Centauri and about what they did to the crew of the *Yuri Gagarin.*"

I was beginning to enjoy the conversation, and so was he. It was like the old days, except that the "old days" were twenty years in his past and only six in mine.

"When the *Yuri Gagarin* found a planet in orbit around Alpha Centauri A," I said, "they sent down a pinnace. Two of the crewmen were nabbed, and their minds were — changed. They went back up to the orbiting *Gagarin* and..."

"And they put a hex on the other eight. But *why?*"

"Technology," I told him. "We have a sublight drive now and are on the verge of getting a faster-than. They want to go out exploring — and they have a conquer-and-despoil complex in their minds that would make the old Spanish conquistadors look like Quakers."

"Then why come here? Why not just take apart the *Yuri Gagarin,* see what makes it tick and go about their business? Pry the info out of the crew's minds, if necessary. Why send them back home?"

"Technology," I repeated. "They haven't even discovered radioactivity yet, much less atomic and nuclear physics. Apparently, their planet is unified and run something like Brave New World or 1984. We wouldn't care for it. They have psionics down to a fine art. Not levitation or precognition or teleportation, but the more subtle mental areas. They can pry your mind open and restock it as they want.

"But they don't know a damn thing about relativity theory, and they don't even know about the electromagnetic spectrum. Computer theory, ditto. They have a well-run, highly efficient agrarian society that has basic powered industry without ever having had an industrial revolution. They —"

"Just a second," he interrupted. "Where did you learn all this?"

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"Basically, from Le#an"

He slitted his eyes. "And where did *she* get it?"

"I asked you if you'd believe telepathy, remember?"

"Sure, I remember. And I said I'd believe it. Now tell me what it really is and how it works, and I'll believe that, too."

"Gimme cigarette, Pancho Villa, and I tell all," I said. We had to keep it light at that point, and we both knew it.

"I'm sorry, senor, but you no smoke, anyhow, and eef you no tell me facts pretty damn queek, I keel you."

I could have stopped him. By the time he had that .44 Magnum out from under his desk and pointed it at me, I could have paralyzed his right arm so stiff he couldn't have moved it. Instead, I held control of his trigger finger, and pretended I hadn't even noticed the big heavy pistol.

"Let's take three races of sentient beings of reasonably high intelligence. Call them Sirians, Centaurians and Solarians, just so we can avoid juggling around alien words.

"Mentally, these three races have developed in different, almost divergent ways. And yet, each one has at least one area it can share with at least one of the other two. The Solarians and the Centaurians both study the material universe, although we are technologically far ahead of them. The Sirians just accepted the universe as it is and made no attempt to find out anything about it except for the pragmatic, empirical knowledge that any living thing needs to know in order to exist. Cats and dogs don't need to know anything about genetics in order to reproduce; they don't need to know anything about redox equations to avoid fire; they don't need to know anything about four-dim matrix grav formulas to know how to jump around and to avoid cliff edges; they don't need to know anything about medicine to heal their bodies.

"The Centaurians are like the Sirians, in that they have put a great deal more emphasis on mental development than on the physical. But morally they aren't worth two hoots in hell. Are you following me so far?"

"To a hairline," he said.

For the first time, I looked down at that .44 Magnum barrel. "Not to a hairline," I said. "About three and a half centimeters below it."

The gun wavered for the first time, then centered again.

I looked back up to his eyes. "Still games? Then I'll go on. You have to know one thing: Am I alien or not? And all this yammer isn't going to prove a damn thing, is it? No.

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"So shoot me."

I said that and waited.

"Ah." The gun didn't move. "Good question, Terry, my boy. What can you do to prove you aren't? Answer? Damnifino. As I have said several times now, this is the flakiest story anybody ever heard. You have convinced me that something happened to you out there — something that changed the way your mind operates. *But that's damn well* all *I know!*"

"So shoot me."

The gun felt heavy in my hand, but it didn't waver. Beyond the muzzle, Terry was just looking at me with those hard brown eyes of his. There was no doubt in my mind; he — or whatever was possessing him — was relying on our friendship of twenty years before to keep me from squeezing that trigger.

If we had seen each other often during that twenty years, it might have been different. But two decades is a long time without reinforcement, and the Terry Chang I had known was a memory a generation old.

Besides, I knew beyond any shadow of doubt that it was Terry Chang — not any hypothetical team of Centaurians — that was the great threat to humanity.

I squeezed the trigger of the .44 Magnum.

The automatic bucked in my hand. The roar of that big cartridge in the room was almost deafening. A tongue of flame eight inches long spurted from the muzzle.

At point-blank range, a .44 slug is more than just deadly; it is incredibly messy. The slug struck the bridge of his nose, just between the eyes. It made a hole the size of your thumb going in. It went on through, and the back of his head — splashed.

What was left of his head snapped back as though he'd been slammed in the face by a hard-swung baseball bat. His body followed, toppling backwards and taking the chair with it to the floor.

The wall behind him was splashed with crimson and gray. In the center of the splash was a .44 caliber bullet hole.

The smell of burnt powder was strong, and there was a faint haze of smoke in the air.

I put the gun on the top of my desk and stood up, looking over the desk at the floor.

He looked pretty bad. The hydrostatic shock within his skull had made his eyes bug out, and they were horribly bloodshot. The blood from the great wound in the back of the skull was pouring out into a widening pool on the pale green rug.

I sat down again, folded my arms on the desk top, put my head

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down on them and began to cry.

I watched Don Ricardo lower the gun to the desk, stare for a moment and put his head on his arms to cry. Hell of a thing to do to a man, but I had to convince him and do it fast.

I relaxed control a little, keeping just enough to reduce the shock.

And I got a shock.

As my control dropped below a certain threshold, it was snapped away, suddenly and completely.

Ricardo suddenly sat erect. His cheeks were damp with tears, but those hard eyes were no longer crying.

I had flashed my shields up instantly.

"You...son...of...a...bitch," he said in a low, flat voice.

After long seconds, a slow smile came over Dominguez' face. "Yeah. We've learned a lot in twenty years. Not as much, apparently, as you did in six — but some." He took a tissue out of his desk drawer and wiped his face. I said nothing. It was up to him, now.

"Wow." His voice was still soft, but no longer flat. "That was *real.*" He picked up the pistol again, smelled it. Then he checked the cartridges. All ten were unfired. He put it back in its place in the special holster attached to the underside of his desk.

"You've made your point, Terry," he said. "If you could do that and were inimical to me or the human race, I would be doing what you wanted me to without argument." He leaned back, puffed out his cheeks and blew gently, fluttering his great mustaches. "Now we've settled *that,* what's next on the agenda?"

"I've changed my mind," I told him. "Do you know anything about setting up a shield cone?"

"A cone of power? Certainly. That ony takes half what I've got — and only a small fraction of what you've got."

"What changed my mind was the way you flipped away my control," I confessed. "How good are the girls?"

"Clara and Dorothy? Good. Damn good."

"That's what I'm banking on, Doc. Can we get together this evening? I have to find some people."

"The ten from the *Gagarin?*"

"Only nine," I said. "I know where Number One is. He's been radiating all over the place ever since my landing was announced. That's why I didn't sneak in."

"How about your nine on the *Armstrong?*"

"Don't worry. They'll be down as soon as we need 'em."

"Why don't we get started now?" he asked.

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"Midnight's better. We'll get some early sleep. I have some things to do." I stood up. "And no need saying anything to Clara and Dorothy just yet. I'll want to check them out before tonight. And don't worry; I won't hurt them."

He looked up at me with those gray-green eyes. "You know, Terry, if anyone else had said that, I'd have laughed."

Midnight. 2400 or 0000, whichever you prefer.

"Shield erected."

"Check."

"Begin shaping field."

"Field shaping. Check."

"Hold shield."

"Shield holding. Check."

"Continue, hold, and check."

Four of us sat, sky-clad, in the lotus position, knees touching those of the person on either side, on the soft-pile carpeting in front of the flickering fireplace in the Dominguez living room. To my right was Dorothy — tall, seemingly cool, and touched with some quality of the moon that flooded in through the south window. Clara, to my left, seemed to partake of the fire element, red hair gleaming, all motion and strength. Dominguez himself gave the feeling of darkness meeting, not unwillingly, with light — big, powerful, dangerous when he wanted to be, he faced me across the circle.

"Shield holding."

"Check."

"Field shaping. Almost ready for charge."

"Check."

The fire had burned almost to coals, shedding a flickering red-gold light across the tall comfortable chairs and turning their shapes into odd shadows that seemed to bounce off the pale walls. Hands held around the circle, there was no need for words.

"Field shaped and ready."

"Check. Shaped and ready; begin charging."

"Shield holding. Charge beginning."

"Check. Hold and charge."

The moon was full and almost glaring through the south window; an intense spotlight invading the big window to the south, casting a rectangle of silver on the floor. But bright Sirius, hanging on the horizon, would not be shadowed or dimmed.

"Field charge beginning. Hold shield."

"Check. Hold and charge."

We were the elements of something both ancient and modern — something that extended for the moment. The room blazed with the hot orange-red of fire and was drowned in the coolness of the silver-white light of the moon, pierced by the blue-white pinpoint of Sirius. We were one

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mind, one spirit, one concentration.

"Increase charge."

"Continuing."

"Check."

Clara's eyes were wide and almost fixed. I had never seen them that way before. She moved slightly, not breaking the touch, but as if to reassure herself that the darkness beyond would not touch her, secure in the knowledge that it would not.

"Charge at max."

"Check and hold."

"Prepare to dilate apex of cone."

Dr. Dominguez was absolutely motionless, looking more Oriental than I felt.

"Ready for dilation."

"Begin dilation. Keep it smooth and gentle."

"Check."

"Hold field. Shape and charge."

"Holding. Check."

Dorothy seemed to be motionless, too, glossed over with the light of the dropping moon, still and calm, but focusing like a bubbling creek that laughs its way over a course of rocks.

"Field ready. Charged."

"Shield holding. Ready."

"Apex open. Ready and holding."

"Exude field."

"Check. Ready and holding."

The light changed — dimmed and cast other shadows. We were more complete now.

"Field up. Beam out."

"Up and out, check. Contact Nine of Armstrong."

"Searching...Searching... Searching..."

"Contact!"

We were even more complete, more deeply contemplative of the gathering, reaching closer to each other and to *them*. The moon's silvery rectangle had become a parallelogram as it shifted across the floor.

"Armstrong *Nine in. Mesh and search?"*

"Mesh and search. Check."

"Check."

The fire was only coals, glowing dim and red; there were no shadows left in the room.

"Hold and observe."

"Check. Holding and observing."

"Number One plain and clear?"

"One, plain and clear."

"Check."

Outside, the moon was far to the west. The oblique light made the plants and trees look alien. Bright Sirius had fallen behind the distant hills.

"Two, London."

"Two, London. Check."

"Three, New York."

"Three, New York. Check."

"Four, Moskva."

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"Four, Moskva. Check."

"Five, Washington."

"Five, Washington. Check."

Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. And Ten. We pinpointed them all. It took time, but we had every one of them down pat. We had them isolated and encapsulated physically. All that remained was to take care of the them physically.

"Nine of Armstrong. *We can set down in twelve hours. Give us an extra sixty hours to be in position."*

"Sixty hours. Can do. Check."

"Make and check. Contact seventy-two hours."

"God bless, loves. Out."

"God bless. Out."

There was a splutter from the fireplace, and I turned to look. Clara half-twisted toward the sound. Dorothy smiled and Doc Dominguez made a low sound. The dying flare of a piece of eucalyptus caught our eyes with flickering orange.

We looked at the light and began to laugh.

The next three days were hell and heaven combined. For symbolic reasons, we set up what might be called a war map, with varicolored pins marking the locations of the ten crew members of the old *Gagarin.* One of the strong advantages we had that they didn't was their necessity to disguise themselves and masquerade as someone else. That required that they hold a shield about themselves, and that, in turn, took psychic energy to produce and hold. We had them by the short hair, and we knew it. But they didn't.

They knew that the *Armstrong* had returned, and they knew that one of its crew had landed and was after them. That had given them the stakes, which had allowed us to pinpoint them, but they still didn't realize that they were all dead, gone, and finished.

Not one whisper of information had gone across the four light-years to Alpha Centauri.

We made damn sure of that.

Our problem was getting our hands on Number One. I won't bore you with the details of all the sweating we did to get a channel to Number One — getting papers forged, setting up phony identities, making spurious appointments, tightening schedules, and so on — because we never used any of it.

I was doing some of that detail work in Don Ricardo's office one morning when Dorothy came in, looked at what I was doing, and said, "Junk it, love. Trash-can the whole lot. We have to start all over."

I looked up at her. "What the devil?"

"Just got a call from a friend of mine, Anita Strickland. She's

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getting married tomorrow."

I smiled willingly. "How nice. And you've been invited?"

"That's right, love. She was quite apologetic that my name hadn't been on the list of invitations when they were sent out and was very sorry about the oversight. I'm to pick up the invitations this afternoon."

"Invitations? Plural?"

"I told her I couldn't possibly go without my fiance, Edward Toy."

"All right, you have information I don't have," I admitted. "Who is Anita Strickland?"

"The daughter of Lieutenant General Leslie Strickland, Commanding Officer of the Military Reservation of the Presidio of California at San Francisco."

"Ho, ho, ho," I said without laughing. "Our little friend will have to be there."

"Of course. No way out," she agreed.

"You didn't check with your friend, Anita?"

"No. It would have seemed odd. But Number One will be there. No question."

"Then you're right. We junk Plan One. Call in the troopies; we have to do some hard rethinking."

By thirteen hundred, the four of us were in solemn conclave set. Dorothy told Doc and Clara about the wedding.

"Is it a trap?" Dominguez asked.

"Could be," I said. "It does look a little too convenient." I looked at Dorothy. "What do you think?"

"I think it's legit. I think she honestly intended to invite me. We've known each other since college and have kept in touch ever since. She would have invited me."

"It hasn't been in the news, has it?"

"The engagement was announced three months ago. No date set."

"You know some of her other friends who would have been invited," I said. "Get on the phone. Use the Isn't-it-just-wonderful-about-Anita's-wedding ploy. When was the date set?"

"Got it." She went into the other room.

I looked at Clara. "Any ideas? Or comments?"

"I don't know Anita all that well, but I think you're right in saying that it looks just a little *too* convenient. *They* wouldn't be that sloppy."

"The old problem of 'Which hand is it in?'" Doc said.

"Och, aye," I said. "Let's look at it. If the enemy hasn't spotted us, then the invitation is straight. No problem. We walk in, do our bit, and live happily ever afterward. Right?"

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"Right," Clara agreed. "And if the enemy *has* spotted us, then it's a baited trap. But if that's the case, it seems crudely done, as if they *wanted* us to see the trap."

"Then what *do* they want us to do?" Dominguez asked. "If this is a phony trap, they must want to force us to another elective. But, if so, what is that other elective? I don't see it."

He stopped as the door opened and Dorothy came in.

"I checked," she said. "The wedding's been scheduled for over six weeks. What do we do now?"

We discussed it for another twenty minutes, but we had to come up with the obvious answer in the end. We would go in.

We went to work making the new arrangements and phasing out the old.

I neither like nor dislike weddings. Usually they bore the hell out of me, but if the couple is composed of people I particularly like, who I think will be good for each other, then I can enjoy the ancient ceremony. This one would be different. I didn't know Anita Strickland, and I didn't know Lieutenant Colonel James Kettering. But I knew I wasn't going to be bored.

It was one of those foggy winter afternoons that San Francisco is famous for. Up on the slope of Bernal Hill, it wasn't so bad, but looking down Folsom, it seemed as if the world ended at Courtland. We entered the gray mist, turned left on Courtland to Bayview. Dorothy was driving; I was busy doing magick.

We turned left on Bayshore and followed it to the on-ramp to 101. She let the automatics take over and meshed her mind with mine.

Armstrong *Ten, mesh for check.*

Mesh for check.

All in position?

All in position and ready.

Signs of activity?

None. If they're preparing a trap, as suggested last night, it's a hell of a subtle one.

They're all in their places?

With smiles on their faces.

It looks too easy.

Maybe it is *easy.*

We can't afford to think so. Stand by.

Standing by and ready.

As programmed, we turned off 101 at Turk Street, and Dorothy took control again. We followed Turk in silence, but when Dorothy turned right on Arguello Boulevard, heading toward the Presidio, she said, "I'm scared." She didn't sound it.

"I know," I said.

And that was all we said.

When we crossed West Pacific Avenue and entered into the

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Presidio, Arguello became a winding, curving road that led eventually to the Officer's Club — the oldest adobe building in San Francisco, still in good repair after centuries of use.

A uniformed serviceman checked our invitations and identification, then guided us to the parking area.

Three minutes later, we were inside the Officer's Club of the Presidio of San Francisco.

There weren't many people there, considering the social importance of the wedding. At a guess, I'd have said more than a hundred, but less than a hundred and fifty. It had been kept out of the news, and the only ones invited, besides friends of the bride and groom, were the top crust of the upper layer of the ultra-ultra. The governor was there, tall and impressive, as was the governor's lady, with her silver hair and her massive breasts and belly, all encrusted and sheathed in the best of jewels and cloth. General Strickland was in full dress, lean, balding a little, and looking both pleased and flustered. He had been a widower for eight years.

There were three or four senators, a double handful of legislators from various lower houses, an equal number of Supreme Court judges from all over, and all kinds of judges from lesser courts. There were lawyers from big corporations, bank executives from all over the Bay Area, and a healthy sprinkling of very wealthy or powerful Native Sons.

(*The miners came in 'forty-nine,*
The whores in 'fifty-one;
And when they got together,
They produced the Native Son.)

Up in a special booth was a private photographer with his TV recorder, getting everything down for posterity, watching his multi-bank console to get every angle from all the lenses around the room. Selected sections would be released to the newsies later.

And, of course, the place was absolutely seething with high-ranking officers from the various services in their full-dress uniforms. It was — dare I say it? — a gala occasion.

The ceremony started twelve minutes late, which isn't bad for that sort of thing. The celebrant was a brigadier in the Corps of Chaplains.

The whole thing went through without a hitch, all the way from "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here..." to "...may you so live together in this life that, in the world to come, you may have life everlasting."

James and Anita were man and wife.

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The reception began immediately afterward.

Wedding cake cut. Champagne all around. Toasts by bigwigs of various persuasions. Light laughter. Happiness.

I held a tight shield covered by a light, bubbly surface. With a glass of champagne in my left hand and a happy smile on my face, I walked over to the governor's lady, shoved the .44 Magnum in my right hand against the side of her belly, and pulled the trigger.

She splattered, and the resulting psychic shock wave brought chaos.

The TV pickups continued to roll.

I stepped back into the crowd as she collapsed to the floor.

Her face began to change.

I knew that Dorothy had induced the photographer to get a shot of the governor's lady and that all the camera would pick up on me would be the back of my head. But it would record what was happening to *her* — to her face and her body.

Everyone in the place except Dorothy and me was dazed, shocked and horrified. They were totally incapable of thinking logically or coherently. MP officers were trying to make sense out of the confusion, but they couldn't even make sense out of themselves.

I continued to make my random way toward the door, trying to stick as closely as possible to the path that Dorothy was clearing for me. She was already outside in the car, but her newly awakened mind was doing its job.

There was no MP at the door, nor any outside. Forgetting their training, they had charged inside to the focal center of the psychic shock wave.

Dorothy was ready in the driver's seat of the car as I climbed in. We weren't the only ones who were leaving; there were many who had panicked and were running away instead of toward the shock focus. But we had a head start and got out ahead of the traffic.

I don't think I need go into detail about the next three days; the news broadcasts were full of those wedding pictures. Nearly everyone in the world saw what happened and saw the woman's features change as the muscle control dissolved. And they saw the dead purple thing that had been in a case strapped to her front. When she came to, with her own mind back, she was identified as Marsha Morgan, astrogator of the *Yuri Gagarin.* She did not know what had happened to the governor's real wife. That unfortunate woman was never found and never will be.

The same is true of nine other

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prominent people around the globe. At the moment the psychic shock wave from the Centaurian's sudden death hit, their features began to reform into their natural faces.

All of them told their stories as best they could, but there was a lot of holes left wide open. There had to be.

At the moment of the shock wave, each of the *Gagarin* people was invaded, taken over, and cleaned up by one of the *Armstrong* people. The momentary stunning alone would not have done the job, but it allowed us to get in and do it.

Analysis of what was left of the Centaurian after the bullet and blast from the Magnum hit it convinced the medics and biologists and biochemists that it had never been spawned on Earth, and the psych experts have seen what that sort of control can do to people. They've learned a lot, and they'll learn even more. And we all have to learn more, because there are more things than we know — and more "things" than we know — waiting for us out there.

The first place we'll have to check out is the Sirius system. Those people are entirely too much like human beings for me to trust them.

Especially Le#an.

Coming next month

A brand new novelet, "The Pugilist" by **Poul Anderson**; stories by **Barry N. Malzberg, Robert F. Young,** and others. The November issue goes on sale September 27.

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Kate Wilhelm, whose last story here was "Stranger in the House" (February 1968), here offers a fresh and grim variation on the classic first contact theme.

Whatever Happened To The Olmecs?

KATE WILHELM

Tony looked up impatiently at a tap on her shoulder. She was splicing film that had to be ready by eight, and she was behind.

"I'll take over," Morris said. "Your old man is here, says it's important."

"Don't you touch it," she said rising. "My father? Here?"

"He says he's your father, sweetheart. What'm I, the FBI, I should ask for identification or something?"

"I'll be back in a couple of minutes. Leave that film alone!" Morris shrugged and walked to the door with her. Her office opened onto the cluttered studio where half a dozen people in jeans were working on sets, lounging, waiting for the eight o'clock showing. At the far side of the room she saw her father looking very much out of place. She crossed to him quickly.

"Dad, what are you doing in New York?"

He kissed her cheek. "Can we talk?" He was fifty, five to ten pounds overweight, with curly dark hair. He jingled change in his pocket with one hand and grasped her arm with the other. His eyes shifted constantly, uneasily.

She led him back to her tiny office and closed the door. Most of the group were watching curiously. They knew her father had won the Nobel Prize for his work with quasars; she hoped no one asked for his autograph when he left.

"Tony, I..." He sat down heavily and got out a cigarette, looking at her, at the office.

"There is something wrong. I thought you were on the coast."

"I'm going right back. I came to talk to you."

Tony sat down, too. She could

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feel herself getting tight; the more he fidgeted, the quieter she became.

"It's about Justin. Tony, I'm worried sick about him. I need your help."

Justin? Tony felt her jaw and cheeks clamp. Very deliberately she lighted a cigarette before she asked, "What's wrong with him?"

"Honey, he's gone. He left almost three months ago. Just walked out one day and never came back. And now there's some talk about a security risk." He fumbled with the ashtray. It was nearly covered with film and papers and assorted junk; she knew precisely where everything was on her desk.

"Dad, start over. Three months ago? And you're just now wondering about it? Is it connected to Nancy's death?"

"It must be. He was off on sick leave for a month or so; then he came back and worked for ten weeks, and then he left. He cleaned out everything in his office, burned heaps of papers, didn't leave a scrap of anything, and walked away. Period."

Tony waited. Her father had been Justin's teacher some years ago; now they worked together.

"Honey, do you understand what it means when a man is given the backing of the Clark Institute for independent studies?" She shook her head. "Well, I'll put it this way. I never got such a grant. And he has had it for two years now. He's thirty-four and he can write his own ticket. He has unlimited use of the computer! That's what it means."

"What was he doing?"

"Can't tell you. He sat in on the spitball sessions, we all do, but other than that he was completely on his own. And when he left, he cleaned the files out so thoroughly that no one could pick up where he left off." He lighted another cigarette and stubbed it out again, almost instantly. "They want him back. Or they want him in a hospital if he's having a breakdown."

"You said security risk. In astronomy? Justin?" She stared at her father in disbelief.

"I know that and you know it, but the security people are getting nasty. A man doesn't walk away like that if he's quitting. He hands in his resignation and leaves in an orderly fashion."

"They're looking for new lows to sink to," she said.

"Look, Tony, he's in serious trouble. I'm not kidding about that. He is. What if he did have a breakdown after Nancy's death. My God, it was enough to bring about a collapse. He can't or won't account for where he was after that, when he took off for five weeks. He says he was just driving around the country, and he doesn't remember

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where he went, where he stayed, whom he saw, if anyone. I believe him. That's what he would do. But look at it with a suspicious eye, and suddenly it does seem odd. Now this."

Tony pushed the ashtray closer to him and thought about Justin. "Was he working on something that the military got interested in? You know he would quit if he found out something like that. He always said he would."

Her father shook his head. "It was the same work that led him to apply for the grant in the first place."

"So what made you decide to fly East now? Has something turned up to make it important right now?"

He nodded. "He wouldn't talk to me before, and now I've had orders to stay away from him. They're watching him to see if anyone contacts him, or if he makes any contacts. He has been getting information about Mexico. His passport's in order; there'd be no hitch if he decided to fly almost anywhere in the world. And they can't let him do that. This morning I learned that he had hired a detective agency to check into his own past. *His* past, his parents' past. Other scientists' antecedents. Tony, it looks more and more like a breakdown."

She nodded slowly. "But why me? What did you think I could do?"

"Talk to him. He would trust you."

She shook her head, and she felt her cheeks burning. Very slowly she said, "He doesn't know I'm alive. He never did."

Her father leaned forward and looked at her soberly. "Tony, you've always cared for him. It shows every time anyone mentions his name. Honey, they won't let him leave the country. If they decide that he's been bought, he might have an accident, a fatal accident. If they decide he's having a breakdown, they'll hospitalize him and 'cure' him, or keep him confined for a hell of a long time. If they decide that he's simply played out, that he isn't a risk, or a menace, to himself or anyone else, they might leave him alone. But they have to find out. If he decided to go to Mexico, they'll be forced to do something."

Tony felt frozen. Her father got up and put his hand on her shoulder briefly, then turned to look at her wall covered with photographs. "I've frightened you, haven't I? I meant to. I'm frightened. I'm frightened for him, Tony. He married my sister, but he couldn't mean more to me if he were my own brother, or my son. I'm frightened for him, Tony."

"I can't leave right now," she

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said, wanting to weep, to scream, to curse. "You can't walk in like that and expect me to grab my purse and leave, just like that. I have work to do. A film we have to have ready to show tonight. It's important to me. To those people out there." She was arguing with herself, she realized, and stopped.

"I have to fly back this evening," her father said. "No one knows I came. He wouldn't have to know I've seen you at all. He's at the beach cottage."

"Massachusetts," Tony muttered. They both knew it was settled.

"Tony," her father said then, slowly, kneeling before her, "you know I wouldn't send you to him if I didn't feel desperate."

She nodded resentfully. "And you know I'd break my back to do anything you asked."

"Call me as often as you can," he said. "Tell me how he looks, what he's doing, everything. God knows what you might turn up that will help him."

They walked through the studio and she was thinking, they might still be able to meet the eight o'clock deadline, if she worked through, and then she could fly up. She kissed her father and turned to find Morris at her elbow. Morris was her producer and wanted to be the editor and cameraman, but she was those.

"Back up, creep," she said savagely. "Get some hamburgers and coffee, ham sandwiches, I don't care what and feed these people. And don't disturb me!" She went back to her splicing machine and forgot about her father and Morris and almost forgot about Justin.

At eleven thirty she paid the taxi driver in front of the cottage. It was a beach cottage only because it had always been called that by her family. Her great-grandfather had built the house in 1870, and they added to it bit by bit until it looked like a child's house of blocks. It was two stories in most places, with many chimneys and odd little windows, all totally dark. The air was fresh and cold. She could smell the sea, although she could see nothing of it. The view was at the back of the house.

She felt sick with disappointment and furious with herself for the hurt the empty house forced on her. It would be cold and damp, maybe no electricity, certainly no phone. She hoped there was firewood.

She opened the door and got her suitcase in and gave the door a kick. It slammed and the lights came on. She dropped her suitcase.

"Tony? Is that you?"

"Who's there? Justin?" She could see nothing for a minute; then he came in from the dark

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hallway, into the light. "Justin, I thought no one was here. You scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry, Tony. I might add that you're a surprise, too." He was even thinner than he had been the last time she had seen him, at Nancy's funeral. He had brown hair and eyes, and a complexion that suggested Spanish or Mediterranean descent. He was six feet tall, alarmingly thin.

"What are you doing here?" they asked at the same time. They both laughed, and she hugged her coat tighter to her. "I'm freezing. Is there anything to drink? Coffee?"

"I'll give you an Irish coffee. How's that?" She followed him to the kitchen, their steps echoing through the house. The braided rugs that usually covered the floors were religiously lifted and stored over Labor Day weekend each year.

As she sipped the steaming Irish coffee, she began to warm up. "Are you all right, Justin? You look sick."

"I'm okay," he said. "But what are you doing here? You know it's almost twelve thirty?"

"Justin, listen. You know I make films? I talked an agency into letting me do a segment on speculation. And I spent everything I could rake together to make it just exactly the way I wanted it. And they liked it, Justin! I'm getting a contract to make a twenty-minute film for them. Justin, you wouldn't believe what it means to me! I just couldn't stand it. I had to get away for a while, until I get the contract. Ten days to two weeks, they said. Then I can pay people, pay rent..." She stopped abruptly and took a deep breath. "Sorry," she said, more quietly. She had forgotten, she thought with disbelief. She had actually forgotten that her father had sent her here, that she hadn't simply come. She felt her face burn and lifted her cup.

"That's great, Tony. Really fine," Justin said. "Your father must be proud of you."

"He doesn't know yet. I'll call him in a day or two," she mumbled. He was regarding her with a faint smile, but as if he was not paying very much attention to her and her news, but was listening for something else. "Do you mind that I'm here?" she asked hesitantly. "I mean, you were here first. Do you want to be alone?"

"It doesn't matter," he said, and then he looked at her and really smiled. "It doesn't matter. I'm glad you're here and that something good happened to you."

In bed later, under a thick, light-as-snow comforter that was warm and lovely, she thought again of that smile, how it illuminated his face. Justin was introverted, serious; he seldom laughed, but when he did, it was thoroughly unin-

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hibited. When he paid attention, he paid more attention, more closely, than anyone else. She drifted to sleep, the Irish dulling her senses, the bed warm and soft, and she thought once or twice that she heard his footsteps echoing in the old house.

She slept late and woke to find her room sun-flooded and warm. Justin was on the back porch looking at the ocean when she went down. "What a gorgeous day!" she said. "Good morning."

"It is nice, isn't it? I was going down to the village for some eggs and milk. I thought you might want something, so I waited. Anything I can get you?"

"Let me come too."

"Don't you want to eat first?"

She shook her head. "I'll just put on a sweater, or will I need one?"

"I don't think so."

She walked happily at his side, and in her fantasy life she was his girl, his bride, his wife. She wished she could reach out and take his hand. She wished she was only twelve, or not Nancy's niece, or just a woman he had picked up somewhere along the way. But she wished all those things fleetingly. It was enough that the morning sun was warm and the air brisk and that they walked side by side. He stopped and pointed at a small orange sail that seemed to be flying over the water. They watched it, then walked again.

"I've been thinking about having you up here," Justin said finally. "I guess you should leave today."

"Why? People might talk, something like that?"

"I hadn't thought of that," he said. "It is a point. But what really alarms me is that you might be picked up for questioning. And if there is trouble, you'll be in the middle of it."

"Picked up? Who would do that?"

"I'm being watched," he said.

Tony kicked a pebble and watched it arc into a patch of raspberry bushes. "Who's watching you, Justin? And why?"

"They probably think I'm a spy," he said. "Or if not a spy, a defector or something."

Tony's hands clenched, and she forced them to relax again. "Are you in trouble, Justin?"

"Not really. They won't do anything, I don't think, as long as I stay here quietly. But if the others come, then there will be trouble. How long did you plan to stay?"

"A week, maybe. I didn't have any plans, actually."

"Maybe they won't come that quickly. I had thought by mid-October at the earliest. I don't know." He frowned, and his pace

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quickened until she was almost running to keep up with him.

"Justin, I can't stand it. Who will come? And why will that mean trouble?"

"My parents," he said. "I thought I told you. I'm expecting Mark and Cora Wright."

Tony stopped and stared at him. He took a step or two, then turned to see why she was no longer keeping up. "What do you mean?" she whispered. "Your parents are dead!"

"Oh, no. At least not yet. They'll come to kill me, you see, and if you are here, you might be in danger. That's why I wondered how long you intend to stay."

They were standing about four feet apart. Tony took a step toward him, feeling a knot spreading through her stomach up into her chest. He was looking at her openly, frankly, a good-natured patient expression. "They are dead!" she said again. "You're an orphan."

He shook his head. "They aren't dead. When they come, I'll have to kill them, of course. If they come. You see, they might suspect a trap and stay the hell away." He took her arm and started to walk again. "You're pale. It wasn't a good idea to walk a mile before breakfast after all. Come on, I'll feed you at the coffee shop in the village."

She tried to draw away from him, but he held her arm firmly. After several minutes he said, "Did you ever study any archaeology? I've been reading about the Olmecs. You know they carved giant heads, nine, ten feet tall, and then abandoned them, and the jungle covered them over. Apparently they had no metal, stone against stone. It keeps fascinating me all over again. Why? Are the rest of the figures there, too? And what do you suppose ever happened to the Olmecs?" He continued to talk about vanished civilizations in Central America, all the way to the post office where he collected a dozen or more letters, to the coffee shop where he ordered blueberry pancakes and sausage for both of them, to the grocery store, and all the way home.

All over town the villagers greeted Tony warmly as one of them. They accepted Justin, but he was still on probation and would be for the next twenty years. He seemed unaware of the difference. He talked on about the South Americans, and she thought he must have read every word ever written about them.

"They built pyramids," he said about another of the lost civilizations. "The biggest man-made structure in the world is there. The pyramid of Cholula. And there's a statuette, a woman with two faces. Picasso's Dora Maar might have

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been copied from it. Except, the artifact was found after he did his. They had a myth, or legend, that a bearded god would return one day. He did, and he was Spanish." He paused thoughtfully. "There were the ziggurats. And Egyptian pyramids. Then came the telescopes and finally platforms in the sky for observations of the stars. Why do you suppose man always has looked to the stars? With the idea of communicating with other beings?"

"I don't know," Tony said meekly, not able to keep up. "Most people don't really give a damn, though, do they?"

He smiled at her again, the same illuminated smile that transformed him completely. "Exactly!" he said with satisfaction.

Home again, Justin excused himself and went upstairs with his mail. Minutes later Tony heard a typewriter, and she wandered out to the back where the high granite rocks overlooked the ocean. The sun was very warm now. Later, when the tide went out, she would wander on the tiny beach that would appear. The strip was about fifteen feet wide, with pools and natural dams that protected a multitude of life forms from one high tide to the next. Tony had loved that tiny, isolated beach as a child.

She looked up at Sailors' Inn and knew that was where the observers would be; it was the only spot where the house could be kept under surveillance. At one time the inn had been for sailors, but it had been turned into a roadhouse that specialized in New England seafood and dancing, with rooms to let upstairs. Traveling salesmen, a sleepy family that had driven too far to find a real motel, a couple off for a weekend, those were the kind of people who made up its clientele now. And FBI men, or CIA, or whatever the bureau was that thought Justin was a risk, she thought soberly.

She thought of Justin with an ache that was distant, having existed nine years earlier when she had been sixteen and he had become engaged to her aunt, and that was present now as a deeper ache, one that she knew could never be relieved. Then she had believed right up until the wedding that Justin would suddenly see her, Tony, and he would forget Nancy completely. She hadn't believed, she told herself firmly, she had wanted to believe that. And he never once had seen her, except as Nancy's niece. If he hadn't known, Nancy had. Tony moved uneasily thinking about how Nancy had looked at her one day, shortly before the wedding, how suddenly she had put her arms around Tony and had kissed her gently on her

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cheek. And she, Tony, had jerked away and had flung herself at the house, blinded by tears of fury and mortification and despair.

She picked at lichen in the wall at the top of the bluffs. The lichen was red and blue and purple, insane colors for plants, as if they hadn't discovered chlorophyll in all their long history.

She started when Justin spoke close by her. "Do you want to swim?" he said, obviously repeating it. He was in his bathing trunks, and again she thought how painfully thin he was.

"I'll watch," she said. "That water's too cold."

The beach was appearing, dark with wetness, hard-packed sand that didn't give a bit underfoot. Justin swam vigorously for a few minutes, then toweled himself hard. He was very pink.

"Are you working on something?" she asked. "I heard you typing."

"Letters." He picked up a smooth stone and studied it. "Look, you can see garnet in it. And quartz crystals. Think of its long journey. Maybe two hundred miles, three hundred. I'm not very good at geology," he said apologetically. "There was a mountain, and the glaciers came and broke up great chunks of it and rolled them about here and there. Then the glaciers receded and the forests came back. The earth rose here and fell there. The ocean level rose, fell. A new glaciation period. Over and over, through thousands of years, the ice, the forests, more ice. And finally our little stone ends up on a beach that lives only twelve hours a day. The grinding proccess will go on. A fragment here, a bit there. It will be reduced to grains: quartz, garnet, and the final separation will have come about. A tremendous storm will sweep the coast one day, and it will be carried out to sea along with tons of sand and dirt, trees, houses. The heavier grains will lie on the ocean floor, and the never-ending snow of sediments will cover them. The quartz grains will be virtually immortal, the final goal, after a history that could well extend over several millions of years." He put the stone down almost reverently and gazed at the water. "The problem of man is that he can see only his own span, and that in a distorted shape. If it didn't happen in his yesterday, it didn't really happen at all. If it doesn't happen in his tomorrow, he has no faith in its ever happening."

Tony shifted to look at him. "Will you tell me what you meant when you said your parents will come here? I don't understand. They really are dead, aren't they?"

He shook his head. "They never die," he said harshly. "I sent them a message, in the personal columns

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of the major newspapers all over the world. They'll see it eventually, and they'll know that I found out about them. They'll come. Those letters I had today, they're in response to my ads. But they're not what I'm waiting for. That hasn't come yet. The letters had been opened and read," he said, suddenly cheerful. "*They* know I'm getting crank mail from nuts all over the world. It must worry them." He nodded towards Sailors' Inn, and then stood up. "Let's go up, I'm cold."

"But you haven't explained a thing," Tony said helplessly. "I'm worried about you, and you talk in riddles."

"You're worried about me? Why?"

"Because...because you're in trouble. And you're my uncle."

He smiled at her gently and reached for her hand to pull her to her feet. "You're a very pretty young woman now, Tony, and a hell of a liar." He started the climb up to the house. "I'll tell you about it later. I have to sleep now. I don't dare sleep after dark, but they won't come by daylight. They'll know I'm being watched." He looked over his shoulder at her and grinned a boyish, teasing grin. "So you just bite your tongue and don't say whatever bad word has come to mind. I'll get up at eight or so."

"When do you eat?"

"When I remember," he said, climbing again. "If you have more regular habits, don't wait for me."

The house was very quiet, and Tony found that she was tip-toeing so that her steps wouldn't sound so loud. She took off her shoes. There was little food, none of it dinner fare; later she would walk to the village again. Lobster, she thought. And salad stuff. She wasn't a very good cook, but she couldn't have grown up in that family without knowing about seafoods. She took a book to the back porch and stared at the ocean. The incoming tide was swelled by a fresh northeastern wind; it would get colder that night.

She shopped and she didn't call her father. Not yet, she thought. Just not yet.

The lobster was good, the wine was not, but neither of them cared. They put it aside and drank coffee and watched the rainbow-colored flames the burning driftwood made.

"Justin, now?" she asked contentedly. Her fantasy life was full and rich, she thought, and didn't try to push it away at all.

"Now. Nancy and I went camping that weekend. It seemed that the answers I had looked for were all there suddenly, and I had to get away, or start talking to your father, or someone. And I wasn't ready. Nancy understood about

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things like that," he said. "We always went camping when nice things happened. Not in a tent. Sleeping bags under the stars. All my life," he said, glancing at her for the first time, "I've known exactly what I was going to do. Talk to the stars. There never was a second's doubt. Anyway, they jumped us in the middle of the night. They hit me and tied me to a tree and they raped Nancy and killed her. I watched them do it. Stoned out of their minds, of course. I began to curse them, scream at them, described them in great detail, everything I could think of to get them to kill me, too, but they never touched me after that one rock on the head in the beginning."

Tony was trembling too hard to try to lift her coffee, to light a cigarette, anything. She stared dry-eyed at the fire and waited.

"I stayed there for two days," he said. His voice was emotionless, as if he were describing a movie plot he had seen many years before. "And during those two days, for most of the time, I think I was out of my mind. When those kids found me and cut me down, I was out completely. I didn't remember much of what happened when they took me in and questioned me. I left for a few weeks, and that's a blank, most of it. Driving, day and night, sleeping in the car, eating when I felt faint, or just because I remembered that I hadn't for a long time. And one night, I was driving and ran out of gas and walked to the nearest town, ten, fifteen miles, out under the stars, and I remembered what I was supposed to be doing. Why I was living at all. And I went back to work." He got up abruptly and left the room. Seconds later he returned and sat down again. "The wind," he said. "It's pretty strong now." Earlier he had gone over the entire house, checking windows, doors. He had left the front door unlocked. They were in a small room her grandfather called the study. From it they could see the front door, but he had said he didn't expect anyone this soon, and certainly not this early in the evening.

"Have you ever had an obsession, Tony?" he asked suddenly. "A real obsession?"

She shook her head, unable to look at him.

"Well, it isn't pleasant. Something that haunts you day and night. It was an obsession with me to communicate with other intelligent beings in space. I always knew we could, that they were there, and that our technology was advanced enough to make it possible. Every class I took in school, except those they forced on me, every book I read, it was all directed to that one

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goal. And I was ready to publish, to announce what I had found, what we must do next. I had it all six months ago. That's what was waiting for me when I went back to work. And I looked at it, and I knew that I had been used."

Tony closed her eyes hard, the glare had hurt them. They burned as if the fire that remained on her retinal image was from the tissues of her eyes. She wanted to stop him, but she couldn't speak.

"I had been used just like others had been used in the past," he said, and now emotion was creeping into his voice, charging it with undertones and hurrying his speech. "I must have worked it all out when I was tied to that tree and when I drove those weeks. I didn't have to think it through at all when I went back to work. I sat at my desk for days after that, fitting the pieces together, taking them apart again to see if I could find flaws. It all belonged. I'm a plant. There have been others, and if I fail there will be others after me."

Suddenly Justin jumped up and began to pace rapidly, his voice was very low and almost too fast now for her to distinguish the individual words. "They planted me at birth," he said. "With one fixed idea, to talk to the stars. And I can. I could tell the world how tomorrow. They know it, that's why they're watching me. They're afraid to move against me because they don't know what I might do. I might decide to kill myself and leave them out in the cold. That's what they think. I might have sold out already. They suddenly classified my work," he said. "No reason. They knew I would publish, so they got out their stamps," He laughed and then sat down at Tony's feet, on the floor, and looked up at her. "You don't have to believe me," he said gently. "You don't have to pretend you do or you don't. It's all right."

"But I...it isn't that I don't believe you," she said. "I don't understand you. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Those people listed as my parents, they weren't recovered, you know. No bodies. A convenient crash into the river and one unmarked infant. He was supposed to have been a mechanic, she a housewife. They had had an apartment for two weeks only. They had come from California to Kansas City only two weeks before. No one remembered them at all. They appear out of nowhere, produce one obsessed child and vanish. My parents."

Tony looked down at him helplessly, wanting desperately to take his hands, to put her hand on his hair, to touch him in some way, as if by the reassurance of her touch

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she could bring him out of this nightmare. She didn't dare touch him. "Justin, that's unusual, but not the way you think. You made such a great leap from that to thinking that you were planted, that they were not what they seemed. Don't you see that?"

"Of course. And I decided to let an independent investigator prove me wrong, if he could. I spent the next weeks putting names in the computer, everyone who had published in my field. I got fourteen names of others whose births were very much like my own, two of them in this same generation. One a Russian, one an Israeli. The Israeli was killed in the Six Day War, and the Russian was killed in a plane crash. That leaves me." He grinned at Tony and said, "You know how I'm going to lure them here? I sent them condolences. I put ads in newspapers all over the world. Japan, Hong Kong, England, France, Israel. My ads said: My sympathy for your tragic loss of Alexei and Simon J. I think they'll see it eventually and they'll know."

Tony moistened her lips and asked slowly, "And if no one comes? Then what?"

"Then I'll know I'm suffering from a paranoid persecution complex, and I'll get help," he said.

She touched him then; she put her fingers on his cheek and asked, "Justin, can I stay with you and wait? Please."

He removed her fingers and put her hand back in her lap, his touch very gentle. "I'd like for you to," he said. "For a while." He stood up and stretched. "You go on to bed now." He looked down at her and smiled softly. "You're a nice kid, Tony. You haven't asked me why they did it. Who they are. Nothing. You don't believe a word of it, do you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I guess I don't."

"Thanks for that," he said. "There's a race out there who put couples on planets to produce babies now and then in order to get in touch with the home world when they are able to do it with their own technology. I have to assume that I would be the means to bring them here, and I don't think they would like what they would find. I think they would treat Earth and its people exactly the same way we would treat an island in the Pacific that we discovered housed a contagious and virulent virus that we couldn't cope with. We would exterminate it, the vectors, all life, if necessary, without a moment's hesitation. And I know how to call them, how to bring them to this island of ours."

Tony rose then, her eyes fastened on his face. "How long will you wait?"

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"Two months. I don't think I'll have to wait that long. I think they'll come as soon as they read my ads. Because I know about them. They'll know that I'll try to find them to kill them."

Tony nodded and left it. She took their cups to the kitchen to rinse them and then went to bed. It took her a very long time to fall asleep.

The next day was cold and windy and brilliantly clear. They walked to the village where she left him to call her father.

"He's just tired, dad. Make them give him a few weeks without being harassed, and he'll be all right. I'll stay with him that long."

Her father was nervous about her staying more than a day or two, and he wanted details about Justin, but she cut him off. "I have to go now. He's coming. Make them leave him alone, dad. I promise he won't try to leave."

Tony hung up feeling guilty. She and her father had always been very close. When he and her mother had separated, she had been ten; she had chosen to remain with him, and they had let her do that. She couldn't recall ever lying to him before.

She and Justin were walking home when a horn sounded close behind them. It was the village mechanic, Dougherty, pulling up to stop by them in a Volkswagen.

"Want a ride? Going right by your house."

Justin shook his head, and Tony answered, "No, thanks. We need the exercise. Whose car?"

"Young couple at the inn. Broke down on the highway couple nights ago. Damn Kraut car, can't find a thing wrong with it, but soon's they start, fool thing stops on them."

"Young?" Justin asked. "How young? Kids?"

"Not that young," Dougherty said. "Thirty. Why?"

"Curious, that's all," Justin said. But he was more than just curious, Tony knew. He had a new excited tone in his voice. Dougherty waved to them and started the car again and went on by them.

"They're here!" Justin said exultantly. "I wasn't at all sure they would take the bait. But they're here!"

Tony looked at him miserably. "They're thirty, he said. How could they be thirty?"

"Of course. They'll never get older, good childbearing age, nothing to attract attention." He was walking too fast, and she said nothing more until they got back to the cottage.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, in the kitchen. He had flung down his mail and was pacing. "Justin, what are you going to do?" Her voice was edging over

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toward hysteria. She began to put away the food, forcing her hands to be steady, and not until she put paper towels in the refrigerator did she admit that it might be better to leave everything alone for a while.

The kitchen was large, with a table in the center and room enough for half a dozen people to move about. She sat down and watched Justin.

"I couldn't get near them, not over there with that place crawling with operators," he said, as if thinking out loud. "After you leave, I'll vary my routine, walk on the beach, scramble among the rocks, let them see me doing things out in the open."

"I'm not leaving," Tony said quietly.

"They'll come up with a plan to accost me then."

"I'm not leaving," she said again, more emphatically.

"It's like a chess game now," he said. "We've both castled and we are perfectly safe, but the game can't end in a draw. I'll make the move to break the deadlock, see if they refuse my gambit."

"Justin, listen to me!" Tony cried. "We could go out more. You and I. That wouldn't seem suspicious, but if you just begin to expose yourself after all this time, that wouldn't be natural at all."

He looked at her and frowned. "You won't be here."

"You need someone here so you can sleep," she said, trying to still the desperation that her voice revealed. "Now that you know they're so close, you don't dare just go to sleep." He continued to pace. "Besides," she cried, "I won't go! If you make me leave, I'll go to the inn and stay there!"

He looked at her then, a strange, remote look that was more frightening than his silence. He sat down at the table and studied her. "You should leave now, Tony. Go back to New York and your film making. Your friends." She shook her head. "Tony, you're going to be terribly hurt." He reached out and stroked her hair once and then stood up again. "You're a dear person to me, Tony. Nancy loved you very much. We both always did. I don't want you hurt."

"I can stay then?"

At the doorway he turned and looked at her, and again his face was set and remote. He nodded and left her sitting there.

He was the one who would be hurt, she knew. They didn't understand his gentleness, his real concern for people. Even in his delusions his worry was for others. He was willing to sacrifice his career, his life, to save the world. And they would never understand that.

While he slept, she paced and tried to think. Now, she knew, she

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had to call her father. At eight when Justin got up, she said, "I'm going to the inn to call Morris and see if there's anything new about the contract. Okay?"

"Sure. I'll put on some dinner."

She nodded. The inn was less than a city block away. She looked down on the house from it and wondered if Justin realized how exposed he was there. Every time anyone walked on the porch, in the yard, along the stone wall, he was completely in the open. A high-powered rifle...She shook as the thought surfaced, and she wanted to weep for him. She called her father then, dialing with stiff fingers; her voice was hard and fast.

"Listen, daddy, you have to do something. There's a couple at old Sailor's Inn, and they have to get out of -there." She listened a moment and then said, "Yes, it's part of his delusional system! It's too complicated to explain. If they leave and if no one bothers him for a month, until late October, he'll be all right. I swear he will."

"That's too damned late!" her father said sharply. "He has to come back sooner than that. By the first of the month! Or he won't have a project to come back to, and it won't make a goddamned bit of difference!"

She cried, "I thought we were concerned about him, not the project he's working on!"

"Calm yourself, Tony. For God's sake, keep calm!" He was silent a moment, then said, "Look, I have to think, get in touch with security about that couple. Call me tomorrow."

She nodded at the phone and hung up slowly.

She remembered about Morris and dutifully made the call. There was no news, except general bitching about her absence.

She walked back vaguely disquieted, not knowing why. It was as if she had turned on a switch, she thought, and she didn't know what the machine might produce, or how long it would take, or even what to look for to see if it was operating.

After a late dinner Tony and Justin sat before the fire and talked quietly. "One of our spitball sessions was concerned with the coming crisis in food production," he said. "Someone is going to have to make the decisions about which nations we feed, and which ones we let die of famine, and the choices will be completely political, leading humanity more and more into homogeneity. Those who adapt to our system, our philosophies, our methods will survive, the others will die. And we are becoming the most destructive force this planet has ever seen."

And he talked about the joys of looking at the stars through a big

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telescope. And about pollution, and once more about the Olmecs. And about freedom and meaningful choices. At twelve he told her to go to bed.

She heard his steps and, later, rain, a hard-driving rain that beat at the house all night. It continued into the next day, and when they walked to the village, they looked like a couple of spooks, she thought, all wrapped up in slickers from head to toe. He slept in the afternoon, and she read until five when she put on coffee. While she waited for it to perk, she heard a tapping on the back door and opened it to see her father on the porch. The rain was slanting in from the sea, hitting her full on. It was very cold.

"Daddy!" she cried in relief. "I'm so glad to see you! I have to talk to you." She pulled the door closed and stood in the rain.

"He's asleep?"

She nodded.

"Get something on and come out. We don't want to wake him."

In her slicker again, wet underneath it, she stood on the rain-swept porch and said, "Daddy, are they gone? That couple?"

"Not yet. Now tell me why. They're just drifters."

"He thinks he has to kill them!" Swiftly she told him. "You see, if they leave now, and if those people just leave him alone, he'll be all right. He said he would get help then. He suspects that it's a delusion; if nothing happens, he'll accept that and he'll be all right."

"But the project will be over," her father said. She couldn't see his face under the broad-brimmed hat that he wore.

"What difference does it make? He can do it over again when he's well!"

"There won't be any money for it by then, I've fielded for him, run interference for him, cut through red tape by the ton for him. It's *our* work that he wants to scuttle. Because he got a touch of xenophobia. That's what it is. And I won't let him ruin a life's work over it!"

"He needs time!" Tony cried.

"Balls!" her father said explosively. "He's scared of the dark!" He looked at the inn, at the shadow that rose from the rocks. "Keep him here. Don't let him leave."

"They can't make him work for them! And he'll resist if they try to break in here."

Her father grasped her arm and shook her. "You listen to me, Tony. You're in something that you don't know a damn thing about. Six months ago he found what he was looking for. There are intelligent signals coming in; they've been coming in for a thousand years, maybe more. He has proved it. He knows where they are coming from,

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and he had the computer working on deciphering them. He knows how to send a signal that will be intelligible to those people, whoever they are. All that I know. Damn it, I was working with him! I know what he has. He didn't burn his papers. They analyzed the ashes, scrap paper, all of it. He has his work hidden somewhere. I saw it, Tony. I know what's in those papers. And on the basis of what I know, I sold a bill of goods to some people in the government. Whoever contacts that race will be given information that will be invaluable. New weapons. Health cures. New energy sources. Immortality." His face was very close to hers, and he spoke rapidly, almost feverishly. His hand was hard on her arm. "And that's all true, Tony! Every word of it is true. Think what we've gained in the past hundred years and multiply it by a hundred, two hundred! Knowledge that we couldn't acquire for a thousand years. They gave me six months to produce proof. And after that, no limits! We don't have time to wet-nurse him now."

She yanked free and backed away from him. "You'll kill him if you try to force him now."

"We don't have the goddamn time! Don't you understand what I've been telling you! The project will close, and it won't be revived in my lifetime, not soon enough for our message to go and be answered. I won't give it up! Those men up at the inn, they won't give it up, either. We'll get him a doctor, take care of him, but he has to come back now."

"They can't force him to work," she repeated.

Her father regarded her for a moment and then pulled his hat down lower. "Keep him here," he said again, and left.

Tony went inside and threw her slicker onto the chair. She went upstairs to change, but instead she went to Justin's door and opened it. He sat up instantly, one hand under the covers. Probably pointing a gun at her. She wished he had simply shot.

"Justin, oh, Justin!" She threw herself at him and knelt on the floor, her head buried in the blanket, weeping wildly. "My father came here and I thought he wanted to help you. Justin, I thought he would help. I told him everything. I'm sorry, Justin. Please forgive me. I'm sorry." She sobbed until she was exhausted.

"It's all right, Tony," he said. "It's all right."

She took a deep breath, then another. "I always loved him so much," she said finally. "I trusted him. I admired him. I thought he was perfect for so many years. I was so proud of him, to be his daughter, to have people recognize him."

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Justin's hand was warm on her head. He lifted her face and looked at her. "You're freezing," he said. "Go get dry and I'll come down. We'll talk."

They took coffee to the study where he had made a fire. Tony felt very tired and depressed. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. "Couldn't you go back and just pretend to work?"

"You know I can't, now. Your father will monitor everything from here on out. He'd spot it in an hour. Besides I have to kill my parents."

She didn't open her eyes. Of course.

"Be right back," he whispered. Tony felt tears under her lids and kept her eyes tightly closed. She tried not to hear his soft steps through the hallway, to the kitchen. A door slammed, and there were voices, and then impossibly, incredibly loud, there were shots. She screamed and ran to the kitchen. Justin was at the side of the door holding a small gun. A man and a woman lay on the floor.

It seemed that the house exploded with noise and confusion. Men ran in from the porch, and others from the front of the house. Tony's father was there, trying to pull her away from Justin.

"They're dead," a man said, on the floor next to the woman's body.

"Tony, for God's sake, come here," her father said.

"Leave her alone," another man said in a voice of authority. He glanced down at the bodies. "You killed them," he said to Justin.

He was still holding the gun, pointing it straight ahead. He was paler than she had ever seen a person. Even his lips were white.

"I'll have that now," the man in authority said and went to Justin and took the gun from him. Justin didn't move. "Now you'll go back to work," he said.

"No."

"Yes. You will. We need you, sonny boy. You can talk to them,can you? You will, Justin Wright. For this government. And when they answer, they'll answer for this government. Our questions. No one else is going to know a damn thing about them and how to contact them until we're ready. We're in a deadlock, but whoever talks to the races out there will break that deadlock. You know it, and we know it,and the Russians and the Chinese and every other goddamn country on Earth knows it." Slowly the gun he had taken from Justin rose until it was pointing at him. "And if you don't agree right now, no more games, we'll put you in a hospital as a homicidal psychopath. You'll tell us where the papers are, Wright. You'll tell us anything we ask, and you know it."

"No."

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"Justin, don't be a fool!" Tony's father said. "Come back of your own free will and finish the work you started."

Justin looked at Tony, who was staring at the gun like one hypnotized. He reached out and touched her hair gently. She broke her stare and turned to him. He had a soft smile on his face that was not like any expression she had seen there before.

She shook her head. "No, Justin! You don't have to go back now! They're dead, there won't be any others! You can't let them do this to you!" His expression didn't change. She looked at her father and cried, "You used me! You planned this! You had to find out how to reach him, didn't you? I love him!"

"Puppy love," he said. "Don't be a child, Tony."

"You don't know what you're doing!" she screamed. She pointed to the bodies on the floor. "What about them?" She stared at the bodies and then turned to look with horror at her father. "You brought them," she whispered. "You knew! I told you! So he won't have to keep looking for them now."

"We'll take care of them," the man with the gun said. He looked at Justin, who was pale, but less so now. He still smiled faintly.

"Tony," Justin said, "it's all right. It isn't your fault. Always remember that. I want to go back. Do you understand what I'm telling you?" He looked at her with that strange, remote, very frightening smile, and he continued to watch her until she nodded in despair. "You understand. They deserve it, Tony. Remember that! They deserve it!" Then he turned to the man with the gun. "I must have known. I guess six months ago I knew. Okay. Let's go."

The man hesitated, glanced from Tony to her father. "She'll need a long rest."

"I'll take care of my girl," her father said.

Justin and the man walked out of the kitchen, the other three men following.

"NO!" Tony screamed. "NO! NO!" Someone yanked her arm hard and pulled her through the doorway, into the hall, toward the stairs, and she continued to scream.

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Very short and with a lovely twist, this story first appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. It's not only worthy of reprint, but it also seems more at home here.

The Last Wizard

AVRAM DAVIDSON

For the hundredth time Bilgulis looked with despair at the paper and pencil in front of him. Then he gave a short nod, got up, left his little room, and went two houses up the street, up the stairs, and knocked on the door.

Presently the door opened and high up on the face which looked out at him were a pair of very pale gray-green eyes, otherwise bloodshot and bulging.

Bilgulis said, "I want you teach me how to make spell. I pay you."

The eyes blinked rapidly, the face retreated, the door opened wider, Bilgulis entered, and the door closed. The man said, "So you know, eh. How did you know?"

"I see you through window, Professor," Bilgulis said. "All the time you read great big books."

"'Professor,' yes, they call me that. None of them know. Only you have guessed. After all this time. I, the greatest of the adepts, the last of the wizards — and now you shall be my adept. A tradition four thousand, three hundred and sixty-one years old would have died with me. But now it will not. Sit there. Take reed pen, papyrus, cuttlefish ink, spit three times in bottle."

Laboriously Bilgulis complied. The room was small, crowded, and contained many odd things, including smells. "We will commence, of course," the Professor said, "with some simple spells. To turn an usurer into a green fungus: *Dippa dabba ruthu thuthu* — write, write! —*enlis thu* You have written? So. And to obtain the love of the most beautiful woman in the world: *Coney honey antimony funny cunny crux.* Those two will do for now. Return tomorrow at the same hour. Go."

Bilgulis left. Waiting beside his

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door was a man with a thick brief case and a thin smile. "Mr. Bilgulis, I am from the Friendly Finance Company and in regard to the payment which you —"

"Dippa dabba ruthu thuthu enlis thu," said Bilgulis. The man turned into a green fungus which settled in a hall corner and was slowly eaten by the roaches. Bilgulis sat down at his table, looked at the paper and pencil, and gave a deep sigh.

"Too much time this take," he muttered. "Why I no wash socks, clean toilet, make a big pot cheap beans with pig's tail for eat? No," he said determinedly and once more bent over the paper and pencil.

By and by there was a knock on his door. Answering it he saw before him the most beautiful woman in the world. "I followed you," she said. "I don't know what's happening..."

"Coney honey antimony," said Bilgulis, *"funny cunny crux."*

She sank to her knees and embraced his legs. "I love you. I'll do anything you want."

Bilgulis nodded. "Wash socks, clean toilet," he said. "And cook big pot cheap beans with pig's tail for eat." He heard domestic sounds begin as he seated himself at the table and slowly, gently beat his head. After a moment he rose and left the house again.

Up the street a small crowd was dispersing and among the people he recognized his friend, Labbonna. "Listen, Labbonna," he said.

Labbonna peered at him through dirty, mended eyeglasses. "You see excitement?" he asked, eager to tell.

"I no see."

Labbonna drew himself up and gestured. "You know Professor live there? He just now go crazy," he said, rolling his eyes and dribbling and flapping his arms in vivid imitation. "Call ambulance but he drop down dead. Too bad, hey?"

"Too bad." Bilgulis sighed.

"Read too much big book."

Bilgulis cleared his throat, looking embarrassed. "Listen, Labbonna —"

"What you want?"

"How long you in country?"

"Torty year."

"You speak good English."

"Citizen."

Bilgulis nodded. He drew a pencil and piece of paper from his pocket. "Listen, Labbonna. Do me big help. How you make spell in English, *Please send me your free offer?* One 'f' or two?"

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This new story marks the welcome return to these pages of one of the genre's finest fantasy writers, the author of more than 50 books and hundreds of stories and articles. Mr. Wellman writes: "Some 25 years ago, I began wandering the Southern Appalachians, looking for old songs and old tales, making friends with the mountain people, finally building a cabin among them where I spend what time I can spare." From these people grew the tales about John, the wanderer with the silver-strung guitar, which appeared in F&SF and later as a book, WHO FEARS THE DEVIL? This work was recently made into a motion picture, winner of a gold medal at the Atlanta Film Festival. "John and his silver strung guitar don't get into this tale; yet I based it on something I heard in his mountain country, and I tell it in something like the language he uses and I use, too, when I'm in those parts."

Dead Man's Chair

MANLY WADE WELLMAN

They buried old Noah Mears on the side of the mountain, prayed for his soul and filled up his grave with earth and stones. Rachel Mears rode back in her stepson's pickup truck to the cabin that would be all hers from now on. "Come on, Hack," she said as they got down. "I want you to take your papa's old chair, the one he used to rock in."

Hack goggled at her. He wasn't much younger than Rachel, who'd called herself forty-six for two years now, and sometimes she reckoned he didn't like her the way most men round there did. She used drugstore stuff to keep her hair as yellow as butter, made herself stand straight and tall and shaped out. It was a pleasure to her when folks wondered did she wear falsies, and her waist looked nipped in, though it wasn't. Rachel Mears was a well-grown woman, ripe and rosy as an apple.

"Don't you want to be here alone by yourself?" Hack inquired of her. "You look tired, and that's a natural fact."

She could believe it. Hardly a

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wink of sleep in the cabin last night, after Noah's body had gone off to the undertaker's in town. Again and again she'd sat up, thinking she heard his old chair creak. And, dark as it had been, she'd felt he'd been sitting in the chair like always, big and hunchy-shouldered, lean-chinned, staring eyes like old gray bullets.

"You can take your time," Hack said. "Figure out whatever you want me to have of papa's things."

"Get the chair now," and she opened the big front door of cleated planks. Nair reason to remind him the law gave her the cabin and all that was in it and all Noah's money in the bank and all Noah's wide lands that grew yellow corn and red tomatoes and bright tobacco, so that Noah's widow woman would be richest of all the folks in the township, and fair enough, when she'd given him the best years of her life. Maybe there'd be some good years left for her to enjoy without him sitting there, rocking there, looking at her with his dull old eyes.

Light in the big room was brown and dim on the planks of the walls and the log rafters up under the roof. There in the middle of the floor was Noah's chair. Did it stir in the breeze from the open door?

"I've got to say I'm proud of you," Hack was saying, like as if he wanted to sound fair. "No cryin' or like that."

"I won't cry," she said to him, and to herself: why cry over Noah, who'd married her when she was twenty-two and he was fifty-five, whose dying she'd waited for so long so she'd be shed of him and have the land and money?

Hack bent to pick up the chair. Rachel looked at Noah's old corncob pipe on the fireboard above the hearth, fancying she could smell that pipe, the way she'd fancied last night the hunchy-shouldered shadow in the chair. She was glad that chair was gone.

But it wasn't. Hack started his truck outside, and there the chair still was where it had been, rocking gently.

"Hack!" Out she ran, waving her round arms. "Why didn't you take it with you?"

"Shoo." He gopped back into the empty truck bed. "Thought I had it." He cut off the motor and got out again. "Funny."

Back in he came, and this time she watched him carry the chair out and load it in, watched him drive off with it, down the rutty road. Then she went in at the door and to the back of the room beside the stove and reached a glass fruit jar off the shelf. She poured herself a big drink of the good kind that came from Rupe Hunley's blockade still. She put it to her mouth and let

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it burn down into her and make her feel good. She'd needed that. She smiled. She was a single woman now, and a fine looking one at that, with land and money of her own.

A scrape of noise. She looked round and there, by God, was Noah's rocking chair, rocking.

A couple of neighbor folks craned out from their cabins as Rachel came running out, her gingham skirts on a flutter, to the rail fence. She yelled to Mr. Joe Sargent's least boy, walking by just then, and gave him a quarter to hurry, quick now, up the branch and fetch back Aunt Jane Sherfessee, the granny woman. Rachel hadn't been able to think of air another soul with sense enough to talk to her, maybe help her. When the boy went racing off, she stayed out in the yard. She looked at trees and wondered why their leaves seemed duller than common. She looked up at the sky and studied a streak of dark cloud that lay in the blue like a swimming snake. She waited out there, not even sitting down on the door log, till Aunt Jane Sherfessee came walking into sight, old but proud. By then, the sun was dropping down toward the gap-toothed mountain ridge back of the cabin.

Aunt Jane swung her stick more than leaned on it. Likely she was older than Noah had been, and her hair was blizzardy white, but the age had just seasoned her, not limped her over. In her face, knotted like a fist, her gray eyes weren't dull like Noah's; they were as bright as two chunks of feldspar. She'd been midwifing babies into the world for tens and tens of years. Come to study it, she'd been there to help Rachel get born. And if she didn't know the whole world, she knew a heap. Most times her talk helped folks who didn't know whichaway to turn.

"Hidy," she bade Rachel, coming into the yard like a queen in the soft twilight. "I don't much reckon you're havin' a baby, not when you and Noah hated one another so black, and you scared to look at air man beside him for fear he'd find out and cut you off from his money."

Rachel led Aunt Jane in. Even with company, the big room had a lonesome feel to it. Aunt Jane walked past the rocking chair and sat on the fireplace bench with her hands on the top of the stick. Nair word did she speak till Rachel was done telling all about the way the chair troubled her.

"Likely you're just before havin' supper," she allowed then. "I'll take a bite with you."

Rachel sliced up cold roast pork and cold pone and boiled coffee so stout it could have moved one end of the cabin. Aunt Jane ate a few

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mouthfuls and pushed her plate away.

"You know, Rachel, I've learnt a lot from life," she said. "I've studied sciences, too, bein' a granny woman. Had to study a course in town to get my certificate from the state health folks."

"But you ain't forgot old ways and wisdoms," said Rachel back.

"No," and the white head shook. "I still burn feathers at the bed foot, and watch where the moon is." Aunt Jane looked out the open door. "Yonder she rises, in her last quarter. But if I was one of them doctor specialists, them they call psychiatrists," she said, "I might could guess you got a guilt feelin', with your thoughts pesterin' round inside you."

"Ain't my thoughts brung that chair back and back again when it had gone out the door," said Rachel. "I ain't that crazy in the head, no matter what your doctors claim. Doctors ain't got half sense."

"Might could be a lot in what you say, but I ain't no doctor, just a granny woman." Aunt Jane sipped scalding coffee. "There's another science besides doctorin'. It's got a word called telekinesis."

"First I air heared that," said Rachel.

"That there science is named physical phenomena," Aunt Jane told her. "Big bunches of folks hold with it. Put money in it, study it. Telekinesis means, when a thing moves here and yonder without air hand touchin' it."

"That's what's a-goin on here," Rachel said, not feeling happy to say it. "What I want to know is, why does the thing move?"

"And that thiar's the big question." Aunt Jame's eyes shone in her old face. "Them physical phenomena folks claim spirits is the cause. Makin' tables jump round, pictures fall off walls, rocks come break window glass. Spirits cuttin' up shines because they can't lay still."

"You think Noah can't lay still," said Rachel.

"If air spirit can't, his can't. Why not? Go on and say why not, Rachel Mears."

Her lean, hard oldness made Rachel's flesh feel squashy, not bunched out pretty. "I don't have to say nair word," she said, and saying it made her feel tired.

"No, ma'am, you don't," Aunt Jane agreed her. "But I've lived long enough in these parts, with my eyes and ears open, to know without bein' told. You deviled poor old Noah to death."

"I nair done no such thing," Rachel burst out. "He was eighty years of age, he —"

"You didn't make his life last no longer," broke in Aunt Jane. "Ain't no special thing you done,

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just hundreds of things, year in and year out, to devil him and pester him. So at last he sat yonder in his chair, sat and sat, week after week, month after month, wishin' he was dead and out of your reach."

She looked at the chair, and it stirred and creaked.

"He's shed of you now," Aunt Jane said. "But you ain't shed of him. I wonder, Rachel, if you been thinkin' lately about sayin' a prayer."

Rachel poured a stiff tot from the fruit jar into her coffee. Her hands shook as she poured and lifted the cup and drank.

"You tellin' me to pray he leaves his chair?" she barely could say, but Aunt Jane heard her.

"No, Rachel. If you say a prayer, pray for him to stay settin' thiar. Pray he never gets up out of it."

"What would he do?"

"Dead folks can get even with livin' folks," replied Aunt Jane, putting down her cup. "Pray he never gets up out of it," she said again.

It was as dull as lead in the room, and shadow lay in the chair. Aunt Jane got up.

"I won't charge you aught for what I've said to help you," she said. "I might could lose my midwife certificate over such doin's as that. So you just make me a present."

"Present?"

"Twenty dollars," Aunt Jane said. "And don't lie to me and say you ain't got it. I know it's here, though Noah never knowed how much of his money you had hid off from him."

Rachel got up, too, heavily, as if she had a log of wood on her back. She went to an old china coffee pot and rummaged in and fetched out a wad of money. She counted a ten and a five and five ones into Aunt Jane's hand. Aunt Jane rolled them up and tucked them into the pocket of her skirt. Then she grabbed her stick.

"Good evenin' to you, Rachel Mears."

Rachel walked out with her. The sun was set. It left a rosy light, like the ghost of flowers, above the mountain. But the air in the yard was dull and dark gray and close feeling.

As Aunt Jane walked out at the gate, Rachel cursed herself, flat and ugly, for being such a gone gump as to come out without lighting the lamp. She didn't want to go back into the dark house, not by herself when it was dark. That was the last thing on earth she wanted to do. Out in the yard she stood, and thought of calling after Aunt Jane, walking out of sight in the early night under the scrap of moon, but she didn't dare do that.

"What if I was to give you a

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wise word, too?" said a deep, laughing voice at Rachel's shoulder. "I'd charge you only half price, ten dollars, and spend it to buy you a nice pretty thing at the store."

Rachel jumped right up in the air, so high she turned round toward him before her feet lit again.

"Your soul to the devil, Frank Hungant!" she screeked out, high and hard with anger. "Who told you to come spyin' on me at my window?"

He only laughed again. "Joe Sargent's boy narrated it all round how Aunt Jane Sherfessee come to see you." He winked. "You might could know I always take a persònal interest in you, so I just cooned in under the sill to hear the talk."

Rachel laughed, too, and felt good laughing. It was mortal hard any time to be mad with Frank Hungant, whose place neighbored hers just on down the road. In the twilight he was taller for a man than even Rachel was for a woman, and he was man all the places she was woman; big, wide shoulders and a ganted waist and long, tough booted legs. Choppy lines came in his face when he grinned, which was most times. He had a streak of black mustache, and sideburns like shutters on each side of a house. He looked like as if he'd just dealt out the cards and was picking up his own hand with four aces off the bottom of the deck.

"You're a sight on this earth, Frank Hungant," she told him, but she laughed again to take the scold away, there while twilight darkened into dusk. "Since you heard the thing, what's your notion? And no ten dollars, either."

"All right, a free will offerin'." He looked at the black rectangle of the open door. "Let's go see that chair that pesters you so bad."

She wasn't afraid to go inside with Frank Hungant along, though some women she knew might could have been. He struck a match and found the lamp and lighted the wick. Its yellow leaf of flame showed the chair, and maybe a shadow humped in it.

"You say it rocks too much for you," said Frank Hungant. "All you got to do is to get shed of it."

"It comes back."

He stood close, elbow against her side. "Not if you burn it, Rachel."

She smiled up at him. He sort of twitched. When she smiled like that, men most always sort of twitched. "I vow," she said. "I declare to God, why didn't I think of that?"

"Because I'll tell you why, you needed me to remind you." His big, long hand was on her round bare arm. "Fire cleans things up,

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burns out things and doesn't leave air thing behind." He let go of her and took hold of the chair, lifting it powerfully. "Come on, Rachel, let's do it right this minute."

Out he wagged the chair, Rachel close behind him. He went round behind the cabin and put the chair down next to the empty old pen where Noah used to keep the two hogs he'd loved like kinfolks till Rachel drove him to selling them. Here and there Frank Hungant poked after wood, and so did she.

"Just lightwood and like that," said Frank Hungant. "Stuff that burns up quick. This old busted-up box will help. And them branches scattered down from the pines, the last storm we had. Let's lay it up, all round the chair."

He had a knife out, shaving the end of a pine twig and leaving the shavings stuck to it, like a little bitty hearth broom. Then another twig, shaving that the same way.

"Got a match, Rachel? Never mind, here's one."

He set the shavings afire and laid more twigs to them. They blazed up and caught onto bigger chunks of wood.

"Now," said Frank Hungant, "that'll master air thing that'll burn. Look at it, jumpin' all over old Noah's chair."

Rachel decided to clap her hands, like a little girl. "We ought to dance round it," she said.

"Oughtn't do no such thing," he said, close to her again, his hand on her arm. "Folks in the houses across the road is watchin', you can bet."

His hard fingers tightened on her flesh. Shucks, he wasn't any much younger than she was. Maybe five or six years. The fire climbed and crackled and sang. It sounded as happy as Rachel felt.

"The chair's burnin' now," said Frank Hungant, squeezing the roundness of her arm. "It ain't goin' to get away from that fire no more."

Hotter and paler jumped the flames. Frank Hungant let go of her, turned on the heel of his boot. They walked back together, to the front of the cabin.

"Come in a minute?" she asked him, the polite way folks ask someone who's stopped by, but she smiled and looked up into his eyes, and said to herself that Frank Hungant was as good looking a man as there was this side of town, and maybe in town, too.

"Don't reckon I'd better, not right now," he said, grinning till his mustache climbed. "Twilly's off visitin' her mamma tonight, but the neighbors still see us in this bit of light, and specially with that fire goin'."

"Then when the fire burns down and it's dark," said Rachel, and he grinned wider.

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"When it's dark," he said after her. "Maybe in about half an hour. And maybe when that lamp ain't burnin' inside, to show the neighbors I'm back at your door."

Off he tramped on his long booted legs. Rachel went back in so fast, she near about ran in.

The chair was gone at last. Noah would be gone with it. And Frank Hungant was gone, but he'd be back in half an hour. "Ha!" said Rachel, to herself and all the quiet inside of the house.

Frank Hungant took a personal interest in her, had an eye for her. Well, all right, Rachel had an eye for him. They'd said so much to each other just now, and left so much unsaid but understood. Back in half an hour, when the fire was burned down and the lamp out. She curled her hand around the top of the lamp chimney and blew into it to leave herself in the dark. The door was open, but leave it open, so he could just walk in, and she'd meet him as he stepped across the log.

If he looked sharp, he could see her close to him, making him welcome. She put her hand to her dress front, undid a button, another. She showed through, white and plumped out to right and left. And when he saw her like that, he'd better recollect that she owned a big sight of land and money, too.

Twilly, that little washed-out wife of his, her name rhymed with silly. Let Rachel Mears call for it to be done later on, and Frank Hungant would divorce Twilly. Twilly wouldn't fight, she didn't know how to fight, she wouldn't have the heart to stay where she wasn't wanted. Then, Frank and Rachel...

How long till the half hour was up? She undid a third button. That was enough, leave a couple for him to undo. Light in here enough for him to see her by, just enough, soft light and somehow rosy, like the sunset a while back.

Her eyes felt pulled to where it was, yonder, where it had come back.

The chair.

It rocked to and fro. Bits of rosy light showed soft where it burned. She couldn't move, her mouth couldn't open or make a sound, only her eyes stuck out. Something rose from the chair, something dark with hunched shoulders, moved toward her, closed in on her.

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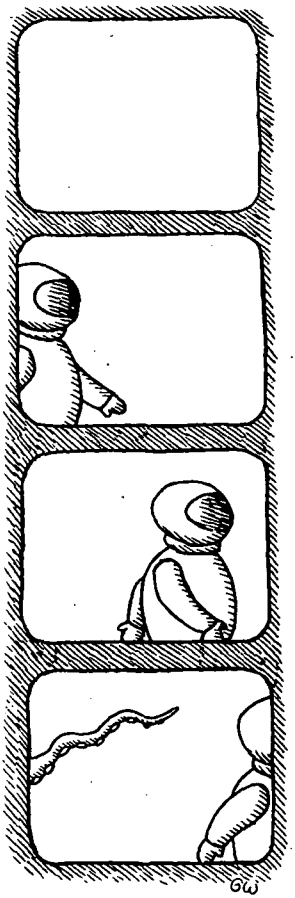
BAIRD SEARLES

Films



REVIVALS, REPEATS AND REFLECTIONS

This has been a totally fallow month in my neck of the woods, so I'm afraid that I'm perforce reduced to reflections on some theatre revivals that have just sprung up and consideration of an oddity seen on television. However, I promise better for next time; the legendary German vampire film, "Jonathan," is to begin a run in the neighborhood soon.

However, here and now I'd like to offer some thoughts on two of the most famous films of the fantastic of recent vintage (that is, not quite old enough to be in the classics stage) that have both been revived hereabouts. They couldn't be more opposite to each other, and since I wasn't in this spot when they had their initial openings, I'd like to get some licks in now on "2001" and "Mary Poppins" (how's that for an odd couple?).

Not that I have much to say about "2001." Perhaps too much has been written about it already. I am and have been unashamedly in love with and in awe of this film; it was the first movie to externalize the magic and majesty that sf had conjured up in my mind's eye for the years that I had been reading it. This time I took a 14-year-old friend; it was his first time and

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about my eighth, and his excited reaction brought back my own first seeing of it. I had not seen it for some time; I was glad to find that it held up, even on a small screen and with a not-very-good print.

I've found particularly interesting the influence the film has had on commercials. For the past five years, I've been horrified at the number of objects (stomach tablets, muffins and, currently, salad dressing) floating in space or rising over a horizon, usually to "Also Sprach Zarathustra." That theme, of course, has also had a transmogification; it now seems to symbolize space flight. I think old Richard Strauss would have been rather taken aback.

From the sublime to the ridiculous — quite literally — how I hate "Mary Poppins." There are certain magic books; many of these are called "juveniles" for lack of a better word, and many of *these* are English; in fact most, from E. Nesbit's to the current crop (from authors such as Alan Garner and Susan Cooper) which are among the most evocatively terrifying books being written today. Disney seems to have made a business of de-magicing these books; he has raped "The Wind in the Willows," "The Sword in the Stone," and "The Jungle Books." (In all fairness, he was not alone. Though I may be arousing considerable ire for saying so, I also hate the film of "The Wizard of Oz.") But perhaps Mary Poppins is the most annoying, if only because it was the most successful.

Oh, it's well done, I can't deny that. That also is infuriating, that so much technical excellence went into it. But it's so damned *sweet.* Those who don't know the books (there were a series) may be startled to learn that Mary Poppins was the epitomal English nanny, whose every word was an admonition to behave. When the project was first announced, Katharine Hepburn was suggested for the role, which should give you some idea. What difference, you might ask; the books are still there for those who want them. But most of the fans of fantasy and sf that I know were introduced to the field by reading about Oz, Mowgli and Mary Poppins. With all these plastic imitations around, in which the darker elements have been excised and replaced with cuteness, a lot of kids are losing out. Perhaps some day a children's fantasy film will be made with those darker elements present; until then, this is one area where I will not concede that film is as good as literature.

*Late, late show dept...*Saw a curious little film the other night which is peripheral, but fascinat-

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ing. Called "The Borgia Stick" (1966, made for TV), I watched it thinking it was going to be a thriller, and after seeing it, am not sure what to call it. The omniscient and omnipresent organization has always been a legitimate sub-genre of speculative fiction (Fu Manchu and James Bond come right to mind, but there are many others). Well, what if this were applied strictly to the world of modern business? What about a monstrous secret organization that for who-knows-what-ends, manipulates businesses and people like puppets? In "The Borgia Stick" we are introduced to a normal suburban couple; he a commuting businessman, she a pretty housewife. After a slow beginning, just as this oh-so-average couple begin to get tiresome, we discover something wrong. We gradually learn that they are hirelings of an organization, strangers as of five years ago, not married, provided with this cover and fake pasts which they use with consumate skill. The eeriness of it comes from the fact that we never quite know, and *they* never quite know, why. They do as they are told. But they are never told why they have sacrificed their own identities and private lives. The plot consists of their finally deciding to break away together, and it isn't easy; "Is he testing my loyalty?" "Is she really not what she says she isn't?" The end effect is of one of the greatest horrors of all: being manipulated by unknown powers for unknown reasons. And this is a remarkably effective modernization of that ancient theme.

I happened to catch "The Thief of Bagdad" (the 1940 one) again the other day, and it occurred to me how surprisingly well that title has fared in its various incarnations. This one, of course, is certainly technically and esthetically one of the towering screen fantasies of all time. The Douglas Fairbanks version (available a couple of years ago on educational TV in a silent film classic series) is equally breathtaking, especially considering when it was made; the designs were by William Cameron Menzies, who directed "Things to Come," and are among the most stylish and phantasmagorical ever done for a movie. And even the Steve Reeves version (1962) is watchable, with some nice effects of its own.

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This is only the second Andre Norton story that F&SF has published; in fact our index to all sf magazines shows only 8 of her short stories published between 1951 and 1970. So here is quite an unusual item: a new short by a writer who has built a considerable reputation over the years for her many entertaining and intelligent novels for young readers.

London Bridge

ANDRE NORTON

"Just another deader —" Sim squatted to do a search.

Me, I don't dig deaders much. No need to. There're plenty of den-ins and stores to rummage if you need a pricker or some cover-ups. Of course, I took that stunner I found by what was left of the dead Fuzz's hand. But that was different, he wasn't *wearing* it. Good shooter too; I got more'n a dozen con-rats before it burned out on me. Now I didn't want to waste any time over a deader, and I said so, loud and clear.

Sim told me to cool the air. He came back with a little tube in his hand. I took one look at that and gave him a sidesweep, took his wrist at just the right angle. The tube flew as straight as a beam across the stalled wiggle-walk and into a blow duct.

"Now what in blue boxes did you want to do that for?" Sim demanded. Not that he squared up to me over it. By now he knows he can't take me and it's no use to try. "I could have traded that to an Up — real red crowns and about ten of them!"

"What trade? Those haze-heads haven't got anything we want and can't get for ourselves."

"Sure, sure. But it's kinda fun showing them a haul like that and seeing 'em get all hot."

"Try it once too often and you'll take a pricker where it won't do you any good. Anyway, we're not here to scrounge."

The city's big. I don't know anybody who's ever gotten all over it. You could walk your feet raw trying since all the wiggle-walks cut out. And some of it's deathtraps — what with Ups who have lost any thinking stuff which ever was

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between their dirty ears, or con-rats. Those get bigger and bolder every time we have a roundup to kill them off. The arcs have shut off in a lot of places, and we use flashes. But those don't show much and they die awfully quick. So we don't go off the regular paths much. Except because of this matter of the Rhyming Man, which was why Sim and I were trailing now. I didn't much like the look ahead. A lot of arcs were gone, and the shadows were thick between those which were left. Anything could hide in a doorway or window to jump us.

We're immune, of course, or we wouldn't be kicking around at all. When the last plague hit, it carried off most of the cits. All the oldies went. I must have been nine — ten — I don't know. You forget about time where the ticks can tell you the hour but not the day or year. I had a good tick on my wrist right now, but it couldn't tell me what day it was, or how many years had gone by. I grew a lot, and sometimes when I got a fit to do something different, I went to the lib and cut into one of the teachers. Most of the T-casts there didn't make much sense. But I'd found a couple in the histro-division on primitives (whatever those were) which had some use. There was Fanna — she got excited about some casts which taught you about how to take care of someone who got hurt. Because of that Sim was walking beside me today. But, as I say, most of the stuff on the tapes was useless to us now.

There are twenty of us, or were 'til the Rhyming Man came around. Some don't remember how it was before the plague. They were too young then. And none of us remember back to before the pollut-die-off. Some of us have paired off for den-in — Lacy and Norse, Bet and Tim. But me, I'm not taking to den-in with some fem yet. There's too much to see and do, and a guy wants to be free to take off when he feels like it. Course I have to keep an eye on Marsie. She's my sister — she was just a baby in the plague days — and she's still young enough to be a nuisance — like believing in the Rhyming Man. Like he's something out of a tape, I mean — that he's going to take good children Outside.

Maybe there was an Outside once. There's so much about it in the tapes, and why would anyone want to spend good time making up a lot of lies and taping them? But to go Outside —no one has for longer than I've been around.

Marsie, she's like me, she digs the tapes. I can take her with me, and she'll sit quiet, not getting up and running out like most littles just when I get interested. No, she'll

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sit quiet with a teacher. I found some tapes of made-up stories — they showed the Outside and animals moving on their own and making noises before you squeezed them. Marsie, she had a fur cat I found and she lugged it everywhere. She wanted it to come alive and kept thinking she could find a way to make it. Kept asking Fanna how you could do that. Littles get awfully set on things sometimes and near burn your ears out asking why — why — why —

That was before the Rhyming Man. We heard about him later. Our territory runs to the double wiggle-walk on Balor, and there we touch on Bart's crowd's hangout. They're like us — not Ups. Once in a while we have a rap-sing with them. We get together for con-rat roundups and things like that. But we don't live cheek by cheek. Well, some time back Bart came over on a mission — a real important search. He had this weirdo story about a couple of their littles going off with the Rhyming Man.

Seems like one of his fems saw part of it. She must have been solid clear through between the ears not to guess it was trouble. She heard his singing first, and she thought someone was running a tape, only it didn't sound right. Said the littles were poking around down in the streets — she could see them through a window. All of a sudden they stood up and stopped what they were doing, then went running off. She didn't think of it again — because Bart's crowd's like us, they don't have any Ups in their territory. He keeps scouts out to make sure of that.

But when it came feed time, those two didn't show. Then the fem shoots out what she saw and heard. So they send out a mission, armed. Though Bart couldn't see how Ups could have got through.

Those littles, they never did find them. And the next day two more were gone. Bart rounded them up, kept them under cover. But three more went and with them the fem he had set with a stunner on guard. So now he wanted to know what gives, and if we had anything to tell him. He was really sky climbing and shadow watching by the time he got to us. Said now a couple more fems were missing. But he had two guys who had seen the Rhyming Man.

What Bart told us sounded like an Up was loose. But for an Up to do the same thing all the time, that wasn't in curve at all. Seems he wore this bright suit — all sparkling — and danced along singing and waving. Bart's boys took straight shots at him (with burners). And they swore that the rays just bounced off him, didn't even shake him.

We organized for a roundup

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quick and combed as much as you can comb with all the den-ins up and down. There was nothing at all. Only, when we came back — two more littles were gone. So Bart's crowd packed up and moved over to our side of the double wiggle-path and settled in a block front, downside from our place. But he was tearing mad, and now he spent most of his time over in his old territory hunting. He was like an Up with a new tube of pills, thinking only of one thing, getting the Rhyming Man.

Though right now I could understand it, how he felt, I mean, because Marsie was gone. We'd warned all our littles and fems good after Bart told us the score. They weren't to go on any search — not without a guy with them. But Marsie had gone to the tape lib this morning with Kath and Don. Don came back by himself saying they had heard some funny singing and that the girls had run away so he could not find them.

We rounded up all the littles and fems and posted a guard like an Up raid was on. Jak and Tim took out one way, Sim and I the other. The lib was empty. We searched there first. And whoever had been there couldn't have doubled back toward us. Too many had the path in good sight. So we went the other way and that took us into deep territory. Only I knew we were going right by what I found just a little while ago and had tucked in my belt now — Marsie's cat.

And if she'd dropped *that* —! I kept my hand on my pricker. Maybe you couldn't finish this Rhyming Man with a burner, but let me get close enough, and I'd use a pricker and my own two hands!

The deep territories are places to make a guy keep watching over his shoulder. They're always so quiet, and you keep coming across deaders from the old days, mostly just bones and such — but still they're deaders. And all those windows — you get an itchy feeling between your shoulders that someone just looked at you and ducked away when you turned around. With a hundred million places for a loony Up to hide out we had no chance at all of finding him. Only I wasn't going to give up as long as I could keep walking — knowing he had Marsie.

Sim had been marking our way. It's been done — getting lost — even keeping to paths we know. But we were coming into a place I'd never seen, big buildings with straight walls, no windows in them. There were a couple of wide doors — and one was open.

"Listen!" Sim pawed my arm. But he needn't have, I heard it too.

"London bridge is broken down,

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Broken down, broken down,
My fair lady.

How shall we build it up again?
Up again, up again?
My fair lady.

Build it up with silver and gold.
Silver and gold, silver and gold.
My fair lady."

I had it now, pointed with my pricker — "In there." Sim nodded and we went through the open door.

"Silver and gold will be stole away,
Stole away, stole away,
My fair lady."

Odd, the sound didn't seem to get any louder, but it wasn't fading away either, just about the same. We were in a big wide hall with a lot of openings off on either side. There were lights here, but so dim you had to take a chance on your path.

"Build it up with iron and steel,
Iron and steel, iron and steel.
My fair lady."

Still ahead as far as I could tell.

"Iron and steel will rust away,
Rust away, rust away,
My fair lady.

Build it up with wood and clay,
Wood and clay, wood and clay.
My fair lady."

All at once the singing was loud and clear. We came out on a balcony above a place so big that most of the den-ins I knew could be packed into it with room to spare. There was light below but it shone up from the floor in a way I had never seen before.

"There he is!" Again I didn't need Sim to point him out. I saw the blazing figure. Blaze he did, blue and gold, like he was a fire, but the wrong color. And he was dancing back and forth as he sang:

"Wood and clay will wash away,
Wash away, wash away,
My fair lady.

Build it up with stone so strong,
Stone so strong, stone so strong.
My fair lady.

Hurrah, it will hold for ages long,
Ages long, ages long.
My fair lady."

At the end of each verse he would bend forward in a jerky little bow, and those listening would clap their hands and laugh.

Because Marsie and Kath were not the only littles down there. There were four others I had never

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seen before. And none of them were Up brats.

The Rhyming Man jigged around. When he stopped and they all yelled for more, he shook his head and waved his hands as if he couldn't talk but could make motions they could understand. They all got up and formed a line and began to hop and skip after him. The floor was all laid out in squares of different colors. And, as those were stepped on, lights flashed underneath. It was as if the littles were playing a game. But I couldn't understand it.

Then the Rhyming Man began that singing again:

"Erry, Orrey, Ickery Ann
Fillison, follison, Nicholas John
Queevy, quavey, English Navy
One, two, three, out goes —
She, he, she, he, she, she, he!"

Like he was shooting off a burner, he pointed his finger at each little in line. And, as he did so (it was like an Up dream), they just weren't there any more!

Marsie! I couldn't jump over that balcony. I'd go splat down there, and that wouldn't do Marsie any good, if she was still alive. But I began running along, trying to find some way down, and there was no way down. Only what would I do when I got there, because now the Rhyming Man was gone also.

Sim pounded along behind me. We were about halfway around that place — still no way down. Then I saw it ahead and I guess I more fell than footed it down those inner stairs. When I came charging out on the empty floor — nothing, nothing at all!

I even got down and felt the squares where they had been standing, pounded on those, thinking those might be doors which opened to drop them through. But the blocks were tight. Then I began to wonder if I had tripped out like an Up — without any pills. I just sat there holding my head, trying to think.

"I saw them, they were here — then they weren't." Sim kicked at one of the squares. "Where did they go?"

If he saw it, too, then I hadn't tripped. But there had to be an answer. I made myself try to remember everything I had seen — that crazy song, them marching, then another crazy song —

I stood up. "They got out somehow. And if there's a door it can be opened." I couldn't just be wild mad, I had to think, and straight now. No use of just wanting to grab the Rhyming Man and pound his head up and down on the floor.

"Listen here, Sim. We've got to find out what happened. I'm staying here to look around. You

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cut back and get the rest of the guys, bring them here. When he comes out, I want that Rhyming Man!"

"Staying here by yourself mightn't be too good an idea, Lew."

"I can take cover. But I don't want to miss him when he comes back. Then I can trail him until you catch up." It might not be too bright, but it was the best plan I had. And I intended going over that flooring until something did happen and we could find the way in to wherever Marsie and the rest of the littles were.

Sim went off. I knew he was glad to get out of that place, but he'd be back. Sim had never back-footed yet on any mission. Meanwhile, I'd better get busy.

I closed my eyes. Sometimes if you think about a thing hard enough you see it like a picture in your mind. Now — the six littles — and then, in front of them, the Rhyming Man jiggling back and forth, his suit all bright and shining — singing about London bridge —

Opening my eyes again I studied the blocks. The littles had been sitting, or squatting, there, there, and there. And he had been over there. I raised my hand to point as if I were showing it all to someone else.

London bridge? London was another city — somewhere — not near here. When the cities were all sealed against the bad air — well, for a while they talked to each other with T-casts. Then it wasn't any use — every one had it all just as bad.

Cities died when their breathers broke — those that had been the worst off in the beginning. In others — who knows what happened? Maybe we were lucky here, maybe we weren't. But our breathers had kept on going — only the plagues hit and people died. After all the oldies died, there was a lot more air.

But London was a city once. London bridge? A bridge to another city? But how could one step off a block onto a bridge you couldn't see, nor feel? Silver and gold — we wore silver and gold things — got them out of the old stores. My tick was gold.

The whole song made a kind of sense, not that that helped any. But that other thing he had sung, after they had moved around on the blocks — I closed my eyes trying to see that march, and I moved to the square Marsie had stood on right at the last, following the different-colored blocks just as I had seen her do.

Yeah, and I nearly lost my second skin there. Because those blocks lit up under my feet. I jumped off — no lights. So the lights had meaning. Maybe the song also —

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I was almost to the block where the Rhyming Man had been, but before I reached it, he was back! He was flashing blue and gold in a way to hurt your eyes, and he just stood there looking at me. He had no stunner nor burner, not even a pricker. I could have cut him down like a con-rat. Only if I did that, I'd never get to Marsie, I had to have what was in his mind to do that.

Then he gave me one of those bows and said something, which made no more sense than you'd get out an Up high on red:

"Higgity, piggity, my black hen —
She lays eggs for gentlemen."

I left my pricker in my belt, but that didn't mean I couldn't take him. I'm light but I'm fast, and I can take any guy in our crowd. It's mostly thinking, getting the jump on the other. He was still spouting when I dived at him.

It was like throwing myself head first into a wall. I never laid a finger on him, just bounced back and hit the floor with a bang which knocked a lot of wind out of me. There he was, standing as cool as drip ice, shaking his head a little as if he couldn't believe any guy would be so dumb as to rush him. I wanted a burner then — in the worst way. Only I haven't had one of those for a long time.

"One, two, three, four,
Five, six, seven.
All good children
Go to Heaven.

One, two, three, four,
Five, six, seven, eight,
All bad children
Have to wait."

I didn't have to have it pounded into my head twice. There was no getting at him — at least not with my hands. Sitting up, I looked at him. Then I saw he was an oldie — *real* oldie. His face was all wrinkled, and on his head there was only a fringe of white hair, he was bald on top. The rest of him was all covered up with those shining clothes. I had never seen such an oldie except on a tape — it was like seeing a story walking around.

"Where's Marsie?" If the oldie was an Up, maybe he could be startled into answering me. You can do that with Ups sometimes.

"One color, two color
Three color, four,
Five color, six color,
Seven color more.
What color is *yours?*"

He pointed to me. And he seemed to be expecting some answer. Did he mean the block I was sitting on? If he did — that was red, as he could see for himself.

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Unless he was on pills — then it sure could be any color as far as he was concerned.

"Red," I played along. Maybe I could keep him talking until the guys got here. Not that there was much chance in that; Sim had a good ways to go.

"You're too tall,
The door's too small."

Again he was shaking his head as if he were really sorry for me for some reason.

"Listen," I tried to be patient, like with an Up you just *had* to learn something from, "Marsie was here. You pointed at her — she was gone. Now just where did she go?"

He took to singing again:

"Build it up with stone so strong,
Stone so strong, stone so strong.

Hurrah, it will last ages long —
Ages long, ages long —"

Somehow he impressed me that behind all his queer singing there was a meaning, if I could only find it. That bit about my being too tall now —

"Why am I too tall?" I asked.

"A.B.C.D.
Tell your age to me."

Age? Marsie was a little — small, young. That fitted. He wanted littles. I was too big, too old.

"I don't know — maybe I'm about sixteen, I guess. But I want Marsie —"

He had been jiggling from one foot to the other as if he wanted to dance right out of the hall. But still he faced me and watched me with that queer I'm-sorry-for-you look of his.

"Seeing's believing — no, no, no!
Seeing's believing, you can't go!
Believing, that is best,
Believing's seeing, that's the test."

Seeing's believing, believing's seeing — I tried to sort that out.

"You mean — the littles — they can believe in something, even though they don't see it? But me, I can't believe unless I see?"

He was nodding now. There was an eager look about him. Like one of the littles playing some trick and waiting for you to be caught. Not a mean trick, a funny, surprise one.

"And I'm too old?"

He was watching me, his head a little on one side.

"One, two, sky blue.
All out but you."

Sky blue — Outside! But the

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sky hadn't been blue for years — it was dirty, poisoned. The whole world Outside was poisoned. We'd heard the warnings from the speakers every time we got close to the old sealed gates. No blue sky — ever again. And if Marsie was Outside — dying —!

I pointed to him just as he had to the littles. I didn't know his game, but I could try to play it, if that was the only way of reaching Marsie now — I had to play it!

"I'm too big, maybe, and I'm too old, maybe. But I can try this believing-seeing thing. And I'm going to keep on trying until I make it work! Either that, or I turn into an oldie like you doing it. So —"

I turned my back on him and went right back to that line of blocks up which they had gone and I started along those with him watching, his head still a little to one side as if he were listening, but not to me. Under my feet those lights flashed. All the time he watched. I was determined to show him that I meant just what I said — I was going to keep on marching up and down there — maybe till I wore a hole through the floor.

Once I went up and nothing happened. So I just turned around, went back, ready to start again.

"This time," I told him, "you say it — loud and clear — you say it just like you did the other time — when the littles went.

At first he shook his head, backed away, making motions with his hands for me to go away. But I stood right there. I was most afraid he would go himself, that I would be left in that big bare hall with no one to open the gate for me. But so far he hadn't done that vanishing bit.

"'Orrey,'" I prompted.

Finally, he shrugged. I could see he thought I was heading into trouble. Well, now it was up to me. Believing was seeing, was it? I had to keep thinking that this was going to work for me as well as it had for the littles. I walked up those flashing blocks.

The Rhyming Man pointed his finger at me.

"Erry, Orrey, Ickery Ann"

I closed my eyes. This was going to take me to Marsie; I had to believe that was true, I hung on to that — hard.

"Fillison, follison, Nicholas John.
Queevy, quavey, English Navy
One, two, three —"

This was it! Marsie — I'm coming!

"Out goes he!"

It was awful, a twisting and turning, not outside me, but in. I kept my eyes shut and thought of Marsie and that I must get to her. Then I fell, down flat. When I

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opened my eyes — this — this wasn't the city!

There was a *blue* sky over me and things I had seen in the T-casts — grass that was still green and not sere and brown like in the last recordings made before they sealed the city forever. There were flowers and a bird — a real live *bird* — flying overhead.

"Amazing!"

I was still on my knees, but I moved around to face him. The Rhyming Man stood there, but that glow which hung around him back in the hall was gone. He just looked like an ordinary oldie, a real tired oldie. But he smiled and waved his hand to me.

"You give me new hopes, boy. You're the first of your age and sex. Several girls have made it, but they were more imaginative by nature."

"Where are we? And where's Marsie?"

"You're Outside. Look over there."

He pointed and I looked. There was a big grey blot — ugly looking, spoiling the brightness of the grass, the blue of the sky. You didn't want to keep looking at it.

"There's your city, the last hope of mandkind, they thought, those poor stubborn fools who had befouled their world. Silver and gold, iron and steel, mud and clay — cities they've been building and rebuilding for thousands of years. Their bridge cities broke and took them along in the destruction. As for Marsie, and those you call the littles, they'll know about real stone, how to really build. You'll find them over that hill."

"And where are you going?"

He sighed and looked even tireder. "Back to play some more games, to hunt for more builders."

"Listen here," I stood up. "Just let me see Marsie, and then I'll go back, too. They'll listen to me. Why, we can bring the whole crowd, Bart's, too, out —"

But he'd started shaking his head even before I was through.

"Ibbity, bibbity, sibbity, Sam. Ibbity, bibbity, as I am —" he repeated and then added, "No going back once you're out."

"You do."

He sighed. "I am programmed to do just that. And I can only bring those ready to believe in seeing —"

"You mean, Sim, Jak, the others can't get out here — ever?"

"Not unless they believe to see. That separates the builders, those ready to begin again, from the city blindmen."

Then he was gone, just like an old arc winking out for the last time.

I started walking, down over the hill. Marsie saw me coming. She had flowers stuck in her hair, and there was a soft furry thing in her

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arms. She put it down to hop away before she came running.

Now we wait for those the Rhyming Man brings. (Sim and Fanna came together two days ago). I don't know who he is, or how he works his tricks. If we see him, he never stays long, and he won't answer questions. We call him Nicholas John, and we live in London Bridge, though it's not London, nor a bridge — just a beginning.

FORECAST FROM AN ORBITING SATELLITE

out of the sooty days approaching midwinter
out of the haze blistering roof road and nostril
out of the obfuscation of old myth
that junkyard littered with marble and rosemary
out of the sourdough mountains
out of the southern ravines and stone crocks
the man crawls
out of the broken tenements of bad faith
out of the poisoned crusts left by fat children
out of the ivy covered closets with half moons
cut through to the darkness with a dull axe
out of synthetic ribbons bound around crematory urns
the mans crawls
out of discarded bomb fragments too small to eat from
out of the warped dimension with a pentagonal roof
out of the soiled rivers drowning our fathers' names
the man crawls
out of the mathematics of eight symphonies
out of the lees of viridian green which resemble
a love letter stolen from a pharoah's tomb
out of his debt to lizards and lemurs
out of the big ear listening in Arecibo
out of the black holes of gravity and laughter
the man crawls
the green beast

— Sonya Dorman

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THE MISPRONOUNCED METAL

As a die-hard one-worlder, I scorn the way people quarrel over languages. What the devil difference does it make whether you speak one language or another, as long as we all learn some *one* language which we might call "Earth-standard?" Then, if you're not trying to make youself understood generally, use whatever private code you wish, for goodness' sake.

Naturally, I think Earth-standard should be very close to English. It's not because I happen to know English, but because English is already more widely and commonly spoken than any other language on Earth and is still on the way up.

Consider, then, how lucky I am — I already speak Earth-standard. No wonder I can afford to be lofty about the petty prejudices of those people who don't, and consider their quarrels over languages that are not Earth-standard to be childish.

So you think that I would not be affected by minor dialectical differences in English. If I scorn quarrels over entire languages I certainly won't be perturbed by a small matter of pronunciation.

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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Oh, do you? You understand nothing about human nature, then.

Last night, I was watching an episode of "The Avengers," which I watch every chance I get since there are few episodes I have seen oftener than a dozen times. And in this episode, one of the characters casually referred to a "school schedule" pronouncing it "skool shedule."

I was rocketing out of my chair at once, crying out incoherently something that would have been like this if I could have maintained my cool. "Shedule?" I was trying to say. "*She*dule? Why not say 'shool

This issue marks not only an anniversary for the magazine, but one for this column as well. This essay — number 180 in a series that began in 1958 — completes the fifteenth year of Isaac Asimov's science feature in F&SF, and never an issue missed! Happily, we have from Dr. Asimov a promise to keep right on going indefinitely.

To catch up as far as possible on his other work, 1973 will mark the publication of Isaac Asimov's 150th book. The record for this year looks like this:

Already published in 1973

How Did We Find Out The Earth Is Round, Walker, $4.50
Comets And Meteors, Follet, $1.25
The Sun, Follett, $1.25
How Did We Find Out About Electricity, Walker, $4.50
The Shaping Of North America, Houghton Mifflin, $5.95
Today And Tomorrow And —, Doubleday, $6.95
Jupiter, The Largest Planet, Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, $5.95
Ginn Science Program - Advanced Level A, Ginn and Co.
Ginn Science Program - Advanced Level B, Ginn and Co.

Scheduled for publication in 1973

How Did We Find Out About Numbers, Walker
How Did We Find Out About Dinosaurs, Walker
Tragedy Of The Moon, Doubleday (the 10th hard cover collection of essays from F&SF)
Best Of Asimov, 1939-1972, Sphere Books
Our World In Space, New York Graphic
Please Explain, Houghton Mifflin
Nebula Anthology Eight, Harper & Row

A final footnote to this anniversary essay. Although none of the above releases are new Asimov fiction, we can announce that we have a brand new Asimov novelet on hand, a story that is probably the ultimate in robotics stories. It's title is "— That Thou Art Mindful Of Him," and it will appear here later this year.

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shedule?' Why not say sholar for scholar, and sheme for scheme, and shizophrenia for schizophrenia, and Shenectady for Schenectady. Only in German is 'sch' pronounced 'sh' as in schnitzel and Schubert. You hear me? You hear me?"

They didn't hear me. I missed a full five minutes of the program and it did me no good. Worse yet, I do this every time I hear anyone mispronounce 'schedule' in that jackass way, and it never does me any good.

It happens in science, too. What do you call that nice, shiny white metal they use to make sidings and airplanes out of? Aluminum, right? Aluminum, pronounced uh-LOO-mih-num, right? Anybody knows that!

But do you know how the British spell it? Aluminium, pronounced AL-yoo-MIH-nee-um. Ever hear anything so ridiculous? The French and Germans spell it "aluminium," too, but they're foreigners who don't speak Earth-standard. You'd think the British, however, using *our* language, would be more careful.

Oh, well, though there's nothing I can do about shedule, there's something I can do about aluminium. I can write an article about the metal and spell it ALUMINUM all the way through.

It started in ancient times in connection with dyes. There were very few decent dyes in ancient times. Some substances had the color one would expect of a dye, but were useless because they wouldn't stick to the fabric. They would just give it a faint tinge and then wash out the next time the garment was beaten with sticks at the river bank.

At least as far back as 2000 B.C. in Egypt, however, it was discovered that if the garment were first boiled with solutions of certain colorless substances, and then washed, and *then* boiled with the dye — the dye would stick. Apparently, the colorless substance sticks to the fabric and the dye sticks to the colorless substance.

Such an intermediate compound is called a "mordant" from a Latin word meaning "biting" because the mordants used were bitter solutions that hurt if they found the exposed nerves in small cuts and abrasions. The particular mordant most commonly used was called "alumen" by the Romans, a word which seems to be related to Greek words meaning "bitter." We call it "alum."

Chemically, an alum is any of a large class of double-salts in which a sulfate group is attached to two different metals. The variety that is most common (and perhaps most frequently used by the ancients) is "common

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alum," or "potassium alum." It is actually potassium aluminum sulfate and if you want its chemical formula it is $K_2SO_4.Al_2(SO_4)_3.24H_2O$.

We meet up with alum in the styptic pencil used for minor cuts in shaving. The word "styptic" is from a Greek word meaning "to contract" because alum causes small blood vessels to contract. After the biting pain of the first touch of the styptic pencil, the bleeding stops. Alum is also called an "astringent" from a Latin word meaning to draw tight or contract.

In the 18th Century, mineralogical chemistry had blossomed and there was an enormous push toward determining the basic constituents of the various rocky substances used by mankind. These basic constituents were termed "earths," largely because they shared the properties that the rocky crust of the earth had: they did not dissolve in water, nor melt in fire, nor burn in air (see THE MULTIPLYING ELEMENTS, February 1970).

The first to obtain what seemed a simple earth from alum was a German chemist, Johann Heinrich Pott, in 1746. Another German chemist, Andreas Sigismund Marggraf also reported it in 1754, and went farther. He discovered he could obtain the same earth, whatever it was, from various clays. Furthermore, he showed it was a distinct earth, with properties different from the earth obtained from chalk and limestone.

It was customary, in those days, to give earths that did not already have some common name, the ending "a" attached to the stem of the name of the mineral from which it was obtained. The earth that came from alumen was, therefore, named (with the switch of one letter for the sake of euphony) "alumina."

By the end of the 18th Century, the French chemist Antoine Laurent Lavoisier had established modern chemistry and had showed the key role played by oxygen in combustion and in rusting (see SLOW BURN, October 1962). He maintained that the various earths were made up of some metal in combination with oxygen. The combination was so tight that there did not exist any laboratory methods to break it so that the metal remained unknown.

We could argue through hindsight, of course, that since atoms were held together by electrical forces, the grip might be broken by the use of electrical forces. The chemists of 1800 didn't know about atoms and electrical forces, but methods for producing an electric current were just being devised, and chemists were anxious to make use of this new and glamorous phenomenon.

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An electric current won't go through the typical mineral, but it will, sometimes, go through the mineral when it is liquefied. In 1807 and 1808, the English chemist Humphry Davy melted certain minerals and passed an electric current through them, obtaining the metals they contained in pure form. In this way, he produced metals such as sodium, potassium, magnesium, calcium, strontium, and barium.

These metals held on to other atoms so tightly that anything short of an electric current wouldn't have pried them loose. Once loose, they had a strong tendency to combine with anything in reach. Naturally, they combined with oxygen from the air. They even snatched oxygen from the water molecule, which is made up of oxygen combined with hydrogen. The hydrogen which is left behind bubbles off and generally catches fire. For that reason, Davy's metals, when kept for use in the chemistry laboratory, are left immersed in a non-oxygen-containing liquid such as kerosene.

Notice, by the way, that Davy's metals all have the same ending. In the 1780s, Lavoisier had established the systematic chemical terminology we still use today, and there was international agreement to adopt the Latin ending "um" for metals that were newly discovered and did not already have a common name. The Romans, you see, had used that ending. To them, gold, silver, copper, iron, tin and lead had been aurum, argentum, cuprum, ferrum, stannum, and plumbum.

The "um" was added to the stem of the name of the mineral from which the metal was obtained. The metal from "baryta" (from a Greek word meaning "heavy") was named "bari-um" (the "y" and "i" being equivalent). The metal obtained from the mineral "stronianite" (named for Strontian, Scotland, where it was found) was named "stronti-um." The metal obtained from the mineral "magnesia" (named for an ancient Greek town) was named "magnesi-um" and so on.

Through pure circumstance, many metals retained the "i" from the name of the mineral, so that the ending was "ium." However, it was "um" that was the essential ending. Thus, certain metals, discovered in 1748, 1781, and 1802, were named "platinum," "molybdenum" and "tantalum" respectively; names that are kept to this day and which are spelled and pronounced identically in Great Britain and in the United States.

But let us get back to alumina. Could it be broken up by an electric current and the metal obtained? Unfortunately, it couldn't, because neither alumina nor any related compound could be melted at any

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reasonable temperature, and an electric current could not be forced through it.

For a while, Davy had thought he had succeeded, and he named the metal "aluminum" in perfectly correct fashion — the "um" ending placed on the stem of the name of the ore.

Alas, it did not stick. The weight of precedent moved heavily in favor of the "ium" ending. Since 1802, only one out of the nearly sixty metals that have been discovered, received a straight "um" ending and that was "lanthanum." There was therefore a strong push in favor of "aluminium" rather than "aluminum," and this was *wrong.*

No, not because I feel it violates Latin or anything as prissy as that. Consider, though, that until 1880, not a single element had been given an English name of more than four syllables. Why should "aluminium" with five syllables be introduced? (In fact, try to say "aluminium" three times rapidly and anyone listening will burst into laughter.)

Since 1880, multi-syllabic elements have been with us, for a variety of reasons. There are seven elements with five syllables now: gadolinium, neodymium, protactinium, americium, californium, mendelevium, and rutherfordium. There is even one element with six syllables: praseodymium. All are uncommon elements, however, that would never choke the mouth of anyone but a professional chemist. But why give five syllables to an element as commonly in everyone's mouth as aluminum?

Right? — Right!

Now that that's settled, let's get on to the isolation of the metal in alumina. Davy had failed with an electric current, but what about more conventional methods?

Alumina is made up of aluminum and oxygen (Al_2O_3) held together very tightly. If one could use some element that held on to oxygen even more tightly than aluminum did, it would replace the aluminum, which would then be left behind in its metallic form.

Davy's metals formed even tighter bonds with oxygen than aluminum did, so what about them? Of course, they were dangerous to use, and potassium, the most active, was also the most dangerous. What's more, they were expensive but, at the time, potassium was least expensive.

The first to try this was a Danish chemist, Hans Christian Oersted. The details don't matter, but in essence, his method was to free the aluminum atoms by their replacement with potassium, using metallic potassium for the purpose.

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What Oersted obtained in this way, in 1825, was at best a very impure sample of aluminum, but some was there, and he was therefore the first man in the history of the world to set eyes on that silvery metal. In 1827, the German chemist, Friedrick Wöhler, used a modification of Oersted's method to obtain a somewhat purer sample of aluminum, enough of it in pure enough form to get an idea of its properties.

Those properties turned out to be quite remarkable. For one thing, aluminum was very light for a metal. Whereas a cubic centimeter of iron weighed 7.86 grams, a cubic centimeter of aluminum weighed 2.70 grams.

There were metals that were less dense than aluminum, to be sure. The density of potassium and sodium are 0.86 and 0.97 grams per cubic centimeter, only one-third that of aluminum.

But there is a difference. Sodium and potassium are so eager to combine with almost anything that they don't *stay* sodium and potassium very long. And even if they did, they are as soft as wax and can't be used for the usual structural functions of, say, iron.

Aluminum, on the other hand, although it has nearly as great a tendency to combine with other atoms as sodium and potassium do, does not do so in practice. Why not? Well, as soon as it is formed, the aluminum atoms on the surface bind themselves strongly to oxygen atoms from the air. The aluminum oxide so formed remains on the surface, one molecule thick, and forms so tight and coherent a layer that the aluminum atoms underneath aren't touched by the oxygen even over prolonged periods. The aluminum oxide layer is so thin as to be transparent, and aluminum continues to look perfectly metallic and uncorroded.

Indeed, aluminum is far better in this respect than iron is. Iron is less active than aluminum and its atoms have a lesser tendency to combine with oxygen. Iron atoms do combine though, especially in the presence of water, and when they do so, the iron oxide that forms is, in the first place, orange, and shows up as an unsightly rust over the metal. Then, too, the oxide is crumbly and falls away, uncovering more iron atoms that combine with oxygen in their turn.

But in that case, why isn't metallic aluminum found in nature if, once formed, it remains metallic? Ah, the catch is in the phrase "once formed." The geological processes that formed the crust of the Earth scattered aluminum in the form of widely dispersed atoms, all of which combined with oxygen and other atoms. It is only man who has concentrated aluminum atoms in bulk so that those on the surface could protect those beneath.

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Of course, iron is stronger than aluminum if we consider solid pipes of given size. If we consider weight, however, then an aluminum pipe of a given length would be greater in diameter than an iron pipe of the same weight and length. The greater strength of iron would be not nearly as pronounced then, weight for weight.

Next, consider the way in which metals conduct electricity. The best conductors are silver, copper and gold in that order. The resistivity for these three, in microhm-centimeters at 20 degrees C., is 1.59, 1.72, and 2.44 respectively. Since copper is the most available of the three, and is better than gold and not too much worse than silver, it is the preferred material for electrical wiring. Anything else would either increase the expense, increase the loss of electrical energy as heat, or both.

Well, not quite anything else. Consider aluminum, which has a resistivity of 2.82. Aluminum is only 3/10 as dense as copper. If the same weight of aluminum and of copper were used to form wires of given length, the aluminum wire would have a cross-sectional area 3 1/3 times that of copper and the aluminum wire would then have only half the resistivity of the copper wire.

In short, weight for weight, aluminum is the best electrical conductor. And the same goes for the closely-allied property of heat-conductivity.

Aluminum also has the very unusual property of retaining its metallic and silvery shine when reduced to a fine powder. Aluminum gleams brightly while powdered metals of other kinds tend to be black. If you suspend the aluminum powder in some appropriate dispersing medium, you have aluminum paint.

And, of course, as in the case of many other metals, aluminum can be beaten into thin layers so that you can have aluminum foil, lighter and shinier than most metal foils.

Think of those uses, then. Think of aluminum's lightness, its strength, its non-corrodability, its electrical conductivity, and so on and so on. Surely, the possibilities are delightful — unless the metal should happen to be rare. The best metal in the world is of no use for most purposes if it is so rare that it can be obtained only in small quantities and, then, only at great expense.

Well, relax, aluminum is not a rare metal at all. For every gram of copper in the Earth's crust, there are 1,100 grams of iron and 1,800 grams of aluminum. The discrepancy is even greater in terms of atom numbers. For every atom of copper in the Earth's crust, there are 1,250 atoms of iron and 4,750 atoms of aluminum.

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Aluminum is, actually, the most common metal in the Earth's crust. There are nearly four times as many aluminum atoms all about us as iron atoms — the next most common metal.

And yet all is not well. The trouble lies in the difficulty of getting those aluminum atoms to let go. Iron oxides can be heated with plentiful, cheap, and safe carbon atoms in the form of coke or charcoal, and metallic iron is with us at once. For aluminum oxides, carbon atoms aren't enough as oxygen-grabbers. In the 1820s, it was the exceedingly dangerous and expensive potassium that had to be used, and even then the aluminum obtained was impure.

The first pure aluminum was prepared in 1854 by the French chemist, Henri Sainte-Claire Deville. Sainte-Claire Deville had worked out methods for producing metallic sodium in larger quantities than had hitherto been possible. This meant that metallic sodium became considerably cheaper than potassium. It was not quite as active as potassium, and was therefore safer to use, and it was still active enough to replace the aluminum as a gripper of oxygen.

Sainte-Claire Deville repeated Wöhler's method for preparing aluminum, with the substitution of sodium for potassium. Using generous quantities of this now-readily-available material, he produced a quantity of pure aluminum.

But just because sodium was cheaper than it had been, didn't mean it was *cheap*. By Sainte-Claire Deville's method, pure aluminum remained an expensive and, indeed, a semi-precious metal. It cost $10 a pound through the 1870's, and $10 in the 1870's meant many times what it does now a century later.

Napoleon III, Emperor of France, searching for a properly imperial gift for his infant son, gave him an aluminum rattle. And the Americans, in 1884, completed the Washington Monument by placing nothing less lavish than an aluminum tip on it. None of your plebeian gold.

The delightful properties of aluminum were known, of course, but it was also quite certain that it would remain an expensive metal as long as sodium or potassium were needed for its preparation. Ah, if only electrical methods could be used in preparing aluminum directly, rather than in preparing sodium as the middleman —

One person interested in aluminum production was the American chemist Frank Fanning Jewett, who had studied in Germany under Wöhler. In 1885, he was teaching chemistry to the senior class at Oberlin

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College. In discussing the properties of aluminum in class, he sighed and said that anyone who could devise a practical method for preparing aluminum cheaply would surely make a fortune.

In the class was young Charles Martin Hall. Fired up, he decided to devote himself to the task of finding such a cheap method. He set up a chemical laboratory in a woodshed, put together some electrical batteries and got to work.

He needed an aluminum compound in liquid form. Alumina was no good for it melted at a temperature of 2050 degrees C., and neither Hall nor anyone else could work cheaply at that temperature.

Of course, some aluminum compounds can be easily melted. One such is sodium aluminum fluoride, which is found in nature as the mineral "cryolite."

The "cryo-" prefix is from a Greek word meaning "icy cold" and it is a fitting name for a number of reasons. First, it has the appearance of ice and an index of refraction almost exactly like that of water, so that it seems to disappear when placed in water as ice does (though of course, this is only seeming, since the cryolite neither melts nor dissolves in the water). It does melt at quite a low temperature, however. The heat of a candle will do the job, so that it almost seems to be a high-melting ice. Finally, the only good natural source of cryolite, discovered in 1749, is near Ivigtut, on the west coast of Greenland's southern tip, which is another association with ice.

Could an electric current passed through molten cryolite liberate the aluminum atoms present in its structure? To a limited extent, but not well.

Hall made the crucial discovery, however, that aluminum oxide would dissolve in molten cryolite. The dissolved aluminum oxide would then be, in effect, in liquid form and at a temperature that Hall could easily handle in his woodshed. He pushed in the electric current — and out came the aluminum.

On February 23, 1886, Hall rushed into Jewett's office; in his hand were small nuggets of pure aluminum. (Those nuggets are still preserved by the Aluminum Company of America in Pittsburgh as the aluminum "crown jewels.") At the time, Hall was only a few months past his 22nd birthday.

The process was soon put into production. Hall had his legal problems, but they were all straightened out and he ended up, as Jewett had foreseen, making a fortune. And the price of aluminum plummeted. By 1900, it was no longer either rare or expensive.

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And here's something that's odd. While Hall was working out his electrolytic method of preparing aluminum, another chemist in France, Paul Louis Toussaint Héroult, was working out precisely the same method, molten cryolite and all.

Both Hall and Héroult have names beginning with H, but what is more remarkable is that both men were born in 1863, so that both were in their early twenties when they made their discoveries. And it further happens that both died in 1914, each one month after his fifty-first birthday. A peculiar coincidence.

Of course, you may think that the Hall-Héroult process had a serious deficiency in requiring cryolite. If the only source of that mineral is in southestern Greenland (and no other important source has ever been discovered), then that limits the availability of aluminum. And when the cryolite is used up, gone is the aluminum.

Actually, the cryolite doesn't get used up rapidly; a little goes quite a long way. Then again, the aluminum industry no longer uses natural cryolite from Greenland; it makes it out of more common substances, and the supply of this synthetic cryolite will last indefinitely.

(Of course, electricity is still a considerable item. Since aluminum is prepared by an electric current and iron by heating with coal, aluminum remains more expensive than iron.)

Almost immediately after aluminum became cheap, it showed what it could do in a startlingly new fashion. Here's the way it came about —

Mankind learned to fly in 1783 with the construction of the first balloons capable of lifting human beings into the air. For over a century, balloons kept growing more elaborate, but they were essentially powerless drifting mechanisms going wherever the wind carried them.

The method of correcting this was plain. Balloons could be made large enough to lift steam engines or internal-combustion engines along with a crew, and these engines could be hooked up to propellers. The balloon could then be driven against the wind, if desired, just as a steamship can be driven against the current.

To make such a "dirigible balloon" (one, that is, that could be "directed"), however, the balloon itself should be formed in some stream-lined shape; otherwise too much energy would be expended just overcoming air resistance.

The spherical shape, which was natural for a balloon, was horribly inefficient. What was wanted was a cigar shape, the long axis parallel to

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the ground, but if a balloon was manufactured with walls of varying strengths in order to make it expand into a cigar-shape, it would be both expensive and unsafe.

An alternative was to place the balloon (or balloons) into a cigar-shaped container made of something strong enough to maintain the shape through the normal buffeting of wind and weather, and yet light enough to be lifted without costing all the efficiency gained through streamlining.

The German army officer, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin, thought that aluminum might fill the bill. He constructed a hollow cigar-shaped aluminum structure, 420 feet long and 38 feet thick, and placed hydrogen-filled balloons within it. Underneath the cigar were two gondolas, each of which contained an engine geared to two propellers. It was the first of a class of vehicles variously called zeppelins, dirigibles, and airships.

On July 2, 1900, Von Zeppelin flew the first airship at speeds of up to 20 miles per hour. It was the *first* powered flight in history* and aluminum made it possible.

And here I might mention one of the less-frequently-referred-to predictions of science fiction. In 1865, Jules Verne published his "From the Earth to the Moon." At the time, twenty-one years before the Hall-Héroult process, aluminum was still a precious metal, but Verne, thoroughly appreciating the fact that no transportation device intended to be lifted off the ground could be built of anything heavy, had his spaceship built of aluminum!

**The Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk, three and a half years later, demonstrated the first powered flight of a* heavier-than-air *machine.*

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This story concerns a science fiction writer who is caught up in a strange breakup of "reality" in a small Pennsylvania town. And although we plead guilty to a kind of cop-out by setting off and qualifying key words in quotes when talking about this piece, we can only say that it is a complex and unusual and brilliant story that will well reward your careful attention.

Lights Out

GEO. ALEC EFFINGER

Ohio drew Courane back. His own Ithaca singing in his forgetful blood, the greeting card home smiling above the flattened hills of the turnpike. He was a nearly famous writer from Ohio. Ohio bred them and turned them loose, Presidents and writers, but only the writers were called back. He was a *nearly* famous writer. The famous ones wrote often of the great Orion's belt of Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, the three C's. The self-important secret hacks wrote of the second-string towns: Dayton, Toledo, Akron. Courane hid his fear behind examinations of Maple Heights, Chagrin Falls, scenic Avon Lake, with block-by-block descriptions of roast beef stands and miniature golf boredom substituting for affection. His characters existed only to visit the Blue Hole and other local attractions. He did not hate his characters as the hacks did, because he could not remember them.

The last white stone walls of Pennsylvania hid him on his way home. The long way escaped behind him, and the final hills, irrigated with more gray road, shivered lower in defeat and let him pass. Courane hurried at safe speeds, running private dramas in his head to prepare, and to restate the past. In the trunk of his car a molded suitcase sheltered copies of his first two books, *She Laughed Her Heads Off* and *Space Spy*. Neither title was his own, but he could not deny the rest. While he wrote them, he dismissed the novels as money-making ventures and smirked at their clever inside jokes. Now, months after they had gone out of print, he began to see the wonderfully subtle books in a light

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the reviewers had ignored. They weren't so bad. He had ten copies of each to give to his parents and neighbors.

Courane was troubled by strange thoughts. His Ford Fairlane was pointed into the sunset, making good time; the radio kept him company, but still he noticed the furtive procession of strange thoughts. They weren't really unpleasant, just unaccustomed and — *strange*. Like the huge carmine ball of the Pennsylvania sun. It looked to his simile-conscious mind like the cheery light at the end of the tunnel. But some monstrous and inhuman tunnel it would have to be. The sun was sucking up the daytime life of trees, rocks and sand and signs and empty cars, the light and noontime spirit of things, and drawing it all away into the darkening sky. Soon nothing would remain but the desiccated, dead, frightening husks, and it would be night again. After dark the objects were so much more *inanimate*. Courane shuddered to see them as they slept frozen to the earth, until the sun rose again and spat back their resident selves.

He knew that he had never thought that before. Maybe it was just the driving. Maybe the driving was starting to get to him. He ought to be tired; he should be lonely in the dusky foreign autumn. With whom could he want to be? He had left his apartment in New York in the early morning, and he had said good-by to no one. If he stayed at his parents' for a month, no one would know. No one would know that he had even gone. That was why he had left.

He had not told his parents that he was coming. Would they know it when he arrived?

In an hour he would get off the highway, he told himself. He would have dinner, and then find a motel for the night. No sense going on until midnight, no sense knocking himself out. It didn't make any difference what time he got home. Maybe he could find a good place to get a couple of drinks, talk with somebody. That's what he needed, he knew, just get some people around him. He was lonely, but he disliked people. All he wanted was a few laughs. Maybe a singles' bar. Meet a "swinger"!

The time passed, marked out in obscure exits where no one got off; the miles went by as little metal tags on poles. The tags had decreasing numbers. *See,* thought Courane, *I only have this much more Pennsylvania to contend with. Thank God.* Real persons measured their lives from incident to event to project to job; their milestones were simple things: putting on snow tires, taking the cat to the vet, buying a new trash can. People were pushed around by

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little things, like the vaguely insolent green highway signs; why did he insist on writing about asteroids? How could he have changed his mind and think that *Space Spy* spoke secretly about true things? Especially with the cover Cipher Books had given it.

He wasn't running from anything in particular. He wasn't trying to recover anything from his blown-away childhood, like ephemeral hugs from the thin spotted arms of his mother to substantiate his fantasies of love. He was just visiting his parents, because after twenty-five years he had discovered that he had no one else to visit. He hoped that his parents would be glad to see him. He hoped that they still lived in the same place.

The sun set at last; the October shadows ran before his lights and merged. Soon he decided to leave the highway at the next exit and hunt up some supper. He turned off, following the ramp round in a lazy curve, circling a dim and lovely stand of birch trees stranded among the loops of pavement. Courane was suddenly deposited on a narrow, broken road. He had to make a quick adjustment from Interstate speed to desolate-waste driving conditions. It was very dark, no houses or streetlamps visible in either direction. Directly ahead of him his headlights illuminated the only obtrusive element in the cornfield vista, a roadsign: *Gremmage 4.* Courane shrugged and followed the arrow to the right.

The rows of corn moved along on both sides of the road, escorting him through the too-late, locked-up country. During the day Courane had watched them from the corner of his eye, all the way across the state. The straight lines of dried-out stalks made patterns, bending and waving like scorched yellow ribbons in the breeze. Courane didn't really think anything about them then; he did not notice their pleasing arrangement or consider their commercial significance. Now, however, under the clearest of October nights, he was troubled by strange thoughts. The corn: maybe it was all a canard, an elaborate hoax, someone's idea of wry humor. The harvested stalks weren't real at all. They were identical plastic models, put there by the farmers or their hired accessory. Courane's tired mind pictured a nationwide holocaust, some fantastic series of fires set to every cornfield in the country, ripping across the fields at the same moment from sea to shining sea; burning and boiling smoke with incredible fury, the heat itself in waves blinded the eyes of the observers. Slowly the sky lightened in his mind, the flames died, and

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the corn still stood, the indestructible husks still in their stamped identical perfection, still in their rural machined rows. The supertough, stainless, pleasant corn was, of course, too hot to touch, out there in the night-dead fields, but altogether unspoiled and ready to be packed away for use next season.

Courane had worked his way through these thoughts before he realized that he had driven almost completely through the town. *Damn hick towns,* he thought. *They're all the same. Like they're a franchise. I could put up the capital and open one myself.* Small towns comforted him. That was why he wrote about them, even on his asteroids. That was why he lived in New York.

Everything seemed closed up, and he would have been disappointed otherwise, but he continued on Ridge Street until he found a diner that was open. He parked the car and went in.

He ordered a pepper steak and French fries, salad, and coffee. The waitress who took his order was young and pretty, but the blatant typicalness of her appearance disturbed him. Courane couldn't identify the discomfort and finally put it out of his mind when she brought his food.

"Just about closing time, sir," she said. "You're lucky. You just made it in under the wire."

Courane was noticing just how small the pepper steak was. He grunted a reply.

"You must be from out of town. I know just about everybody in Gremmage."

Courane made another affirmative sound.

The girl sat down across from Courane in his booth. *Good grief,* he thought.

"Your car parked outside? Reason I ask is, I'm off now and if you're heading out Ridge Street you could give me a ride. Then you wouldn't even have to leave a tip. I don't ask just anybody, don't get *that* idea, but you look safe and I figure I can trust you."

Courane stared at the girl over his cup of coffee. She looked high-school age, working part-time in the diner, very clean and straight. He was annoyed that she thought he looked trustable; he cultivated a private image of himself as roguish and definitely unsafe.

"All right," he said.

The girl smiled. It was such a *clean* smile that Courane felt overwhelmed. "I've got to do the receipts and clean up some," she said, "but I'll be done before you're ready to leave."

He nodded as she slid out of the seat. He finished his meal, disliking the feeling it left in his stomach. As he drank the last of his coffee, the

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waitress reappeared, her apron removed and her coat over her arm.

"Mrs. Perkins says I can go now. She'll take care of the rest of the cleaning up. She's a real doll, Mrs. Perkins."

Courane didn't say anything. He got out of the booth and helped the girl with her coat. "Here," she said, "let me take your money." She rang up the last check of the evening and the two went outside to his car.

Courane opened the door for her, went around the car, and slid in behind the wheel. He started the car, still without saying anything to the girl.

"If you don't mind, you could drop me off at the high school. There's a dance tonight. I'm supposed to watch the refreshment stand."

"Where's that?"

"Just out here on Ridge a ways. Why don't you come to the dance, too?"

Courane sighed. "I'm getting a little beyond that. I haven't been to a dance in years. They don't still twist, do they?"

The girl laughed. "No, that's a long time ago. Anyway, there'll be lots of older people there. It's sort of a square dance. We have them all the time around here. My Aunt Bessie will be there."

"Your parents go to these things?"

The girl went silent for a moment, staring through her window at the frozen night world. "My parents are dead," she said at last. "They were killed in a horrible car crash when I was very young."

Oh boy, thought Courane. He could almost hear the melodramatic chords building behind him.

"I'm sorry," he said, knowing that was the usual thing. He waited for her little sniff, and was not disappointed. They drove on in silence.

In a very short while he saw the school. A white sign on the front lawn said *R. W. Hanson High School.* He stopped the car at the curb, but decided not to get out to open her door. Suddenly he just wanted to get rid of the girl and keep driving. The tiredness was gone. His eyes were deceptively clear, and the short stop had worked out the cramps from his neck and back. He wanted to get back on the turnpike and keep going until he got home. He knew very well that after twenty miles his eyes would burn and his head throb unbearably, his neck would hurt and his constant yawning would blind him to the creeping roadway; but he wanted to go home again, he had to see his parents and show them his books and sleep in his old bed. He had a baseball autographed by Minnie Minoso on his dresser. Would it remember him?

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"It's late, Mr., uh, Mr. —"

"Courane. My name is Sandor Iugo Courane. I'm a writer."

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Mandy."

Good Lord, thought Courane, staring at the padded ceiling of the car.

"What I was saying," said Mandy, "was it's late, and you might as well stop here for the night. Unless there's some emergency why you have to keep driving."

Courane thought about his parents, sitting in the dining room watching television. He could get home before the end of Johnny Carson. "No," he said. "There's no hurry."

"See? Might as well stay over. You can have breakfast at the diner. Old Man Durfee comes in all the time about nine. He'd give you something to write about."

"Is there a motel around?"

"No, but I'm sure Aunt Bessie wouldn't mind you sleeping in the guest room."

For crying out loud, thought Courane.

"Come on inside with me. We can ask her. I want you to meet my boyfriend, Ronald. He goes to college." Courane shook his head skeptically, but killed the engine and got out of the car. He followed the girl into the school building to the cafeteria's crepe fantasy.

His strange thoughts had slowed and quieted and faded into this strange evening, and his mind was helpless to protest. Courane didn't want to continue his trip toward the home he had left in Ohio, and he didn't want to turn around to rush back to the New York he endured, and he certainly didn't want to go to a lemonade square dance in Gremmage, Pennsylvania. Sooner or later, though, he had to do all three. Sooner or later he would learn important things about himself, about how he felt about other people, and about love and frustration, the great puppeteers. He didn't want to know these things, not because he feared them, but because they would take up too much of his time and prove as pointless as all the other discoveries.

Mandy held him by the hand as she led him through the groups of her friends. She smiled and sometimes made introductions. Courane wished that he were alone, on a high bank above something like the Housatonic River. Beauty. The moon, maybe, shining on the water, and no bugs or anything that made him get up itching and uncomfortable with memories of fictional beauties. Beauty, love. No it was the cafeteria, with tables pushed against the walls. Elementary school-age kids sat under

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the tables, pretending that they were in caves.

"This is my Aunt Bessie," said Mandy, introducing Courane to a tall, thin woman who reminded him of his mother.

"I'm very pleased to meet you," he said, shaking her hand. "I've heard a lot about you."

"And I've heard quite a bit about *you,* Mr., uh, Mr. —" said Aunt Bessie.

"Courane," he said, bewildered. "How have you heard about me?"

"I recognized you from your picture," said the woman. "My fiance read your book, *Space Spy.* Left it over at the house one night. I glanced through it, but that kind of stuff just isn't my cup of tea. Had your picture on the back. I said to myself, 'My, what a clean young man to be writing this trash.' Nothing personal in that, you understand. I don't read as much as I should, and when I do I like to stick to the classics."

"I'd be happy to autograph the book for you," Courane said absently.

"Oh, that'd be nice, but we sent it to our boys in Korea. Mandy's class organized the drive. What a shame. How's your wife, Mr. Courane?"

"Wife?" he asked, beginning to notice the insane depths of the wrinkles around her eyes and the great spaces among her frosted brown hairs.

"On the back of the book. You attended a respectable Ivy League school and currently live in New York with your wife and three cats."

"Wife?" Courane panicked. He felt light-headed and dreamlike; he pushed his long fingernails into his palms and felt only a padded, distant pressure. He was aware of Mandy and Aunt Bessie waiting, waiting patiently. Wife? Donna. His wife Donna. How could he have forgotten her? He left without telling her, as though she didn't exist. Was she visiting friends? Did she work during the day, had he gone out for bread and milk and then disappeared? What would Donna think? He ought to call her. He ought to call his parents. Would Donna miss him?

"She's fine," he said. "She sends her love."

"Mr. Courane, could I ask you a question about writing?" asked Mandy.

"Certainly," he said uneasily, wondering where he *did* get his crazy ideas. "I tend to plagiarize. I have a small staff of hacks. Honest people like you send me plot summaries on picture postcards, and I use them without acknowledgement."

Mandy and Aunt Bessie laughed.

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"Isn't he awful nice, Aunt Bessie?" said Mandy. Aunt Bessie smiled and nodded. Courane stood uncomfortably to the side and coughed. Mandy took his hand again. "He needs a place to stay tonight, Aunt Bessie. I thought, well, no sense in his having to drive out to the Hojo's, I mean —"

"That's enough, child," said Aunt Bessie. "He's welcome to stay in the guest room if he doesn't mind the dust."

"Thank you very much," said Courane unhappily.

"It used to be Old Nancy's room," said Aunt Bessie. "It's our privilege, having a writer stay with us. And now we won't have to walk home alone afterward. You two children run along and enjoy yourselves. Shouldn't let an old woman waste your dancing time."

"Aw, Aunt Bessie," said Mandy with a grin.

"Um," said Courane with a sigh.

Courane saw Mandy's girlfriends standing in a huddle beneath rough-textured crepe paper representations of various objects. They watched him, and he pretended that they whispered to each other, hiding their fascination and contempt behind smooth pale hands. Years ago, at home in Ashtabula, maybe Berea, they had stood like that as he went up to the stage to accept his certificates. But they had never whispered about him. No, it was always Donny Di Filippi, who was first-chair cornet and secretary-treasurer of the German club. Now it was his chance at last, and when he glanced at them, he felt a peculiar thrill of emptiness, like a rush of nothing, an edgeless boredom where he should have felt desire, and not even a sadness to mark lust's passing.

Mandy squeezed his fingers, and Courane realized that he had been caught again by a strange thought. He smiled quickly, and the effort was so shallow, so offensive to him that he felt tears flow into his stinging eyes. Mandy was about to speak.

Before she could say anything, he said, "You ought to find Norman. Don't you have to watch the refreshments? Your boyfriend, Norman."

"Ronald. My boyfriend, Ronald. Anyway, he's so *young*. He's majoring in geography or something, for God's sake. He's nothing like you. You're... you're *stimulating*."

"Thank you," said Courane. "Go take care of the refreshments. I want to look around for a while."

"That's silly, but okay," said Mandy. "Don't let those friends of mine sink their claws into you. You're mine tonight. Save the last dance for me."

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"Is that Norman over there?"

"No," said Mandy brightly, "he's not really here tonight." She left him suddenly alone and went to find the refreshment booth.

Courane took a few small steps, staring at the mottled pink and tan tiles of the cafeteria floor. The overlayed smudges and black streaks were pleasingly random, although he was surprised that he could often find a dark smear that precisely limned the exterior curves of his shoes. His path weaved in feigned drunken Brownian fits, and after a dozen paces he stopped and looked around him. Parents and teachers smiled in their dancing, with an effort.

Courane sorted out the music, a scratchy old record beneath a club-footed needle. Paper cups died on the floor, under the magic tappy toes of the adults. Children and young adults segregated themselves in sullen circles. Mandy's friends had dispersed to form new crowds, and Courane was certain that his immediate notoriety passed among them like a new, hidden social illness.

What was he doing here? He ought to be on the road, at least salvaging what he could from his sinking life. He should be learning if he were, in fact, married, and if he had let Donna know that he was going home. Should he dance? Should he get himself some cider? Would Mandy let him have one free, would she remember him?

Courane felt unreal. His senses functioned too well, too clearly. In a glass case on the wall, white plastic letters spelled out *Salisbury Steak and Veg $.65.* He remembered that when he was in high school he wanted to be a doctor.

"Mr. Courane?" It was Aunt Bessie. "I'd like to introduce my fiance, Bill Johnson. Bill's a professor at the college."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Bill," said Courane.

"I'm honored," said Johnson. "I've always been a fan of yours. I really liked *Space Spy*. My copy got all beat up, I read it so much."

"I'd be happy to autograph it for you," said Courane helplessly.

"It's in Korea," said Johnson.

"That's right. I forgot. You're a professor at the college, eh? What field?"

"Oh," said Johnson with an embarrassed laugh, "I'm not a professor yet. Actually I'm just a graduate assistant. Bessie never understands those academic distinctions. But I'm in physics. I have two sophomore labs a week. It's not bad, except for the miserable old equipment they give us. There's a story for you. You ought to write about that. How we're trying to train the scientists of the future on pre-Depression apparatus."

"Do you like cider?" asked

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Courane. "Do you like to dance?" He looked past Johnson's shoulder, where Aunt Bessie's face moved back and forth, pendulum-swinging in and out of eclipse behind her boyfriend's head. She was pleased that they were all getting along so well. It was obvious that she liked Courane and that she considered him to be a fine match for Mandy. Had she forgotten Donna, too? What else had the copy on the back cover said? He wished that he could excuse himself, go outside into the chilly autumn air and swing up the car's trunk, snap open the pebbly brown suitcase, read the books' important data, his paragraph of life, in the blinking red light of the emergency beacon.

"Do you have a story you'd like me to read?" asked Courane. Aunt Bessie and Johnson glanced at each other with secret smiles. Before either could answer, Courane excused himself and walked briskly across the cafeteria floor, among couples planted in advance of the next record. He found Mandy at the refreshment booth. She smiled at him.

"Hello," he said. "I've just been talking with Norman."

"Ronald," she said pleasantly, "and he's not here."

"Johnson. Bill Johnson. Your aunt's fiance."

"Did you like him?"

"I suppose so. I ought to be working. I'm in the middle of a new novel. It's called *Time Spy* right now, but I may change it. I feel guilty about skipping my regular work hours."

"I wish I could write," said Mandy. She pushed a bowl of pretzels toward him. Courane took one and held it. He did not want to think about what sort of stories Mandy might write.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"About ten thirty."

"I really ought to be going. It's been fun, but I should just get back on the turnpike and keep driving." Courane was afraid that he would never remember the way to the highway in the cider and pumpkin dark.

"No," said Mandy, genuinely disappointed, "stay. We don't get many celebrities here."

Neither do we, thought Courane. He said nothing, but turned away from the booth and walked around the edge of the cafeteria toward the door. Before he had gone twenty steps, the lights in the room went out. A loud collective groan arose on all sides of him, and he was frightened, as though he had awakened from a good dream to find himself swallowed by a huge monster. He could see nothing. With the lights had gone the record player, and the only sounds were the amused,

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sarcastic remarks of the housewives and the shrieks of the younger children. In the dark it was very much like Ohio, but the feeling of unseen people rushing by on either side of him, noiselessly, purposelessly, made Courane feel disoriented. He floated in someone else's unpleasant womb.

A voice called through the darkness. "Anyone know where the fuse box is?"

That's silly, thought Courane. *Fifty to one it's not a blown fuse. Not in a high-school cafeteria in the middle of the night. But the fuses are a reassuring ritual. I shall say nothing.*

"I have a flashlight," said another. Courane smiled foolishly as he imagined the man digging it out of his utility belt. What an idea for a story. Real life is a mine of characters. He should make notes, he should remember things and use them. He should benefit from experience. Perhaps there should be realistic people on asteroids, too. Courane tried very hard in his writing; it was difficult to know to whom to listen, the fans or the critics. What he wrote was an *escape* from real life. He performed a valuable service, though the reviewers panned him without recognizing the satiric nature of his work. Courane wished that he could recall what Donna thought of his writing. Did she see what he was doing, did she encourage him? Or did she scorn him, as everyone else did? Would his parents understand? He couldn't remember if they knew that he had become a writer.

"That's strange," said the second voice, the one with the pocket torch. "It won't go on."

"Wait until we change the fuse," said the first voice.

"It runs on batteries," said the second.

We never had this kind of trouble at home, thought Courane. Whenever he thought of Ohio, he felt a cold twinge in his lower abdomen. He remembered having that same feeling in other moments of stress. He wanted a lemonade.

"Mandy?" he called, but there was no answer.

The darkness of the room was the blackness of his mind. He forgot about sounds and smells. It was completely dark, and he hesitated, one foot still above the floor in the middle of a step. He stared ahead vainly, as though he probed deep into his own mind; he feared to see a shimmering image of Steve Wenrope, his ubiquitous hero, form glimmering and sneering in the air above him. How soon would it be before *Time Spy* would be born into the world of wire racks and magazine stands, so that his third child could stare reproachfully at him from every Liggett's,

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Gray Drug, K & B? Would it claim that its unloving parent was an acknowledged master of science fiction? Somewhere there was a parallel time track where Steve Wenrope was real, and writing about him, Courane. His foot still hovered and he feared to put it down to tingle and throb in one world or another. Would he step into that fictional role, become the bastard product of his imagining's imagining? What would happen in this world, then? Would Donna miss him? Would Mandy miss him? Would his parents miss him? Who would finish *Time Spy?*

He had canceled checks to prove that he really existed. He had contracts to prove that he was a writer. He ought to get home, back to New York. If he could find some of Donna's canceled checks, he would learn valuable things about their relationship. He ought to get back into his car. He ought to find his way out of the thickening darkness. He ought to put his foot on the floor.

He stood very still for several seconds. He shook off the feeling of walking into a dimension where he was nothing more than a made-up name on a yellow second sheet. He was alive, worried, tired. But he had copies of his novels in the trunk of his car. One of them had a cover by Charles von Gestern. One of the girls on that cover reminded him of Donna, he remembered. Although he couldn't recall which girl, it made him feel much better to think of that. Donna must be real, then. Surely Aunt Bessie had little motivation to lie. What would Mandy think? He ought to find her and explain his situation. As a writer he would be expected to be a little eccentric. He was a nearly famous writer, and he believed that excused a lot.

"Mandy?" he whispered. He was again glad that she didn't answer. He felt his heart pounding, and he found something to lean against as he listened to the people around him fighting their small circumstance.

"I don't understand why our flashlights don't work," said a voice.

Cause and effect, thought Courane. *Why can't they just reason?*

"What time is it?" asked one woman, her voice edged with the first symptom of hysteria.

"The clock on the wall's stopped," answered one person.

"I can't even see my watch," said another.

"Wait," said another woman, "mine glows in the dark. It's stopped, too! That's strange. The batteries must have worn out."

"What a weird coincidence," said the first woman. "I love a mystery."

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"Mine's stopped, too!"

"And mine!"

Courane recognized the voice of the second woman as that of Aunt Bessie. He walked slowly in her direction, feeling very blind and helpless. He always hated being in the dark; he felt as though he were always just about to smash his face into a wall, even when he knew consciously that there weren't any walls nearby. He bumped into several people, though, and as their shoulders and elbows met in random commerce, he whispered his apologies. There was a false community of purpose among the prisoners of the dark, and everyone excused his ragged progress, trying to act with good will.

"Aunt Bessie?" he called.

"Who is it? Over here."

"It's me. Courane. Where are you?"

"Over here, Sandor. Do you have Mandy? Have you seen her?"

Courane grimaced. He hadn't seen anyone for many minutes.

"I'm right here, Aunt Bessie," said Mandy. "I've been talking to you for a long time."

"I'm sorry, dear. I thought you were that Bettinger girl."

"Well," said Courane, "at least we're all together. Let's not get separated again."

"Why, Sandor, do you think something is seriously wrong?" asked Aunt Bessie.

"Don't upset the girls now, Courane," said a man. Courane supposed that it was Aunt Bessie's fiance, Johnson.

"No, of course there's nothing wrong, Aunt Bessie," said Courane. "It's just a power failure, that's all. We have them all the time in New York. It's a shame about your watch, though."

"Yes," she said. "Do you think there's some connection?"

"I'm not the right one to ask about that," said Courane briskly. "Bill, you're the scientist. Why don't you field that one?"

"Certainly," said Johnson. Courane took a deep breath. He felt Mandy beside him now, her jumper-clad hip against his. He hoped sincerely that he would remember her when he got home. If he *were* married, Mandy would be a useful fantasy object. He could never tell Donna, of course. He would recall how Mandy had sought refuge from the horrors of the dark, standing with her side tightly against his. Did Donna ever do that? Had he ever been caught in an emergency with her? The richness of this experience overwhelmed him, and he could almost taste the new thoughts as they formed in his mind, ready to be pushed back for retrieval on boring evenings next year. If only the editor hadn't allowed Donna's name on his book cover. Was it

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dark at home? Were his cats asleep or chasing each other around the apartment? Was Donna sewing, or cooking, or cleaning, or typing one of his manuscripts? With a start he realized that he had forgotten his parents again. He thanked his guardian angel that he had gotten off the turnpike when he had. He could just see himself driving along through the flatness of Ohio, speeding into the heady buckeye midnight without a thought of his goal, suddenly losing all purpose and reason for traveling and not being aware of it until he stopped for cocoa at the Hojo's. "Where am I going, at such great length, at such speeds, for so long, with what firm resolve? Here I am in Ohio. Why?"

And as he amused himself with nonsense, Ohio called to him across the miles. Ohio had put him through school, had kept his hair groomed, had married him and protected him from alcoholism. Ohio had made him a conscientious voter. He owed a lot to Ohio, and he was embarrassed that something as trivial as a small-town — Pennsylvania town, yet, not even Ohio town — square dance was seducing him away.

"I ought to be going," he said, but no one heard him.

"I have a theory," said Johnson grimly. "I don't want to say anything definite until I have a chance to get back to the lab to test it. But it's actually very simple. First, I have to explain a carbon atom. Now, in its outer shell a carbon atom has room for eight electrons. But each atom has only four. That means that each atom can accept four electrons from one or more atoms of any element, or it can just as easily donate up to four electrons. Either one, give or receive. One carbon atom can give four to another, and the second carbon atom can take them; that's why carbon atoms can form so many different combinations. No other element has atoms capable of making chains of indefinite length with such stability. Now, the nature of electric current is difficult to explain quickly, but let's see if we can try."

Courane stopped listening. He thought about being silent in a large group of people, and his books distant in his car, lying quiet in the dark, clammy trunk, useless.

"My watch has stopped," said Courane. He interrupted Johnson, and he heard a few gasps of surprise. "Mine's stopped, and it's just an old wind-up watch."

"Strange," said Johnson. "I think I ought to get back to the lab. Courane, would you be so kind as to see that Bessie and Mandy get home all right? I want to get to work on this. I'll call you in the morning."

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"Bet the phones are out," said a voice from the darkness.

Courane smiled to himself. He was in a real crisis. Rationally, of course, he was just in a dark cafeteria in a roadside high school. No one had even looked outside. He hadn't heard any strange or threatening noises. But these folks were honest sorts. They were capable, and he had to trust them. He might as well enjoy the experience for what it was worth. One day, perhaps, it would all be an incident in a book in Korea.

"Sure," he said. "Good night, Bill, and...good luck."

"Thanks," said the other slowly. "I may need it, for *all* our sakes."

The swinging door to the cafeteria opened, and Courane heard it wheeze shut again. *He's gone into the kitchen,* he thought with amusement. Johnson must have found his way out the other side, because he did not return. The crowd grew very quiet, and soon Courane was isolated, waiting like a sleepy cow in the barn, alone and possibly in any situation at all. Was he home, in New York, in Ohio? Where would he like to be? When he woke up he would be there, and so he had better choose wisely. If, in the morning, he didn't remember his choice, he would be confused, but he would have his parents or Donna to remind him. He had pretty well decided that Donna was his wife, and that he was married. He had always known his parents, but he had difficulty recalling if he was coming to see them or going away, back to New York. The answer was in his car.

"Let's go," said Courane sleepily. "The car's not far. If we go now we'll beat the rush." No one said anything. "Mandy?" he called. "Aunt Bessie?" He was alone in the dark.

"All right, we're ready now," said Mandy a few seconds later. The three of them joined hands and moved slowly through the crowd, searching for the door.

"Are you okay?" asked Courane, certain that at any moment he would crash his face into the cold metal front of a locker. "What's happening? Why didn't you answer?"

"It's nothing, John," said Aunt Bessie, "we were just getting our things together."

"My name hasn't been John," said Courane. He hoped for a sudden glimpse of light, a path of streetlamps glowing in through the glass-paneled doors of the building. But they walked slowly, hands joined, within the illicit strangeness of the late-at-night scool.

When at last they emerged into the cool air outside, Courane was dismayed to see that the power failure was blacking out the entire

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neighborhood. There was not a light to be seen, except the futile, tiny candle wavers in the bay windows of houses and the frozen dots of starlight. "My car is near," he said.

"The traffic lights will be out," said Aunt Bessie sensibly. "They usually are. Perhaps it will be safer —"

"You never know what sort of person takes advantage of a situation like this," said Courane. "I'd feel better if you'd let me drive you home."

"Aunt Bessie's right," said Mandy. "And so are you."

They walked quietly together; the women stayed on the school's sidewalk, but Courane cut across a corner of the grass. The ground felt crisp and fragile beneath his feet. He wondered where he had walked on ground like that. He couldn't remember exactly. Someone that he knew had that happy faculty; who was it? He recalled that he had invented a mnemonic device to remember his or her name, but, of course, he had forgotten the device. He laughed at his weakness. He was not worried because he was certain that a definite clue was in his car, probably in his trunk. His books were in the trunk.

"While we walk," said Aunt Bessie, "it might be fun to question the very basis of your personality. What makes you *you*, in a manner of speaking."

"It might," said Courane, thinking about the people that he knew and his wife.

"Do you mind if I ask you what might be construed as personal questions, Sandor?" asked Aunt Bessie.

"No," he said. "No, my work takes up most of my time. I spend a lot of time working. Writing, rewriting, typing up final drafts, busy work. And then the round of research and outlining for a new story. A lot of time."

"What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm a writer." Courane saw her dimly; he looked at her with irritation. "I write."

"Yes," said Aunt Bessie patiently, "but what do you *do?* For a living, I mean. You're certainly not a puppet."

Courane laughed again. "Sometimes I'm not so sure."

"Do you write about sex, Mr. Courane?" asked Mandy quietly.

"It's difficult," he said, thinking about sex. "I mean, I could ask you to describe your boyfriend Norman. Sexually. You'd find it difficult, I'm sure."

"I'm sure she would," said Aunt Bessie. "She's too *young* to be one of your fans."

"Anyway, that's *your* job," said Mandy.

"You can call me 'Sandor'," he

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said. "That *Mister* stuff still throws me a little. What can you do with sex? There are breasts, thighs. The possibilities are endowed with a certain fascination, I suppose, a certain entertainment value, but they are limited and the novelty fades quickly."

"Breasts and thighs," whispered Mandy. "There's always the *other.* I mean —"

"Certainly," Courane cut in hastily, "but that sort of thing is so crude. There's more to sex than mere harmonic motion. 'Intercourse' conveys so much more than 'conjunction.' I leave that to Cooperman and the others."

"Mr. Courane," said Aunt Bessie, somewhat sternly, "Thomas Hardy is enough of a caustic influence for Mandy at the moment. Your 'works' may be added to her reading list after her taste for literature has been nurtured through the killing frost of education. If she still desires. But I am intrigued; do you write then of violence?"

Courane was silent for a few seconds. His car ought to be near. Should he begin his answer now, and risk interruption? "I'd be happy to go into that at a later date," he said. "My car is here somewhere, and that question is one of my particular favorites. Ah, here we are. One of these two Fairlanes ought to be mine."

"The one that isn't the convertible, isn't it?" asked Mandy. Courane nodded, forgetting that in the dark he was almost invisible.

He opened the door. "I'm glad it opened," he said. "I was almost afraid that in the cold the lock would freeze."

"It's not that cold yet," said Aunt Bessie.

"Thank goodness," said Mandy.

"Pretty soon, though," said Courane, sliding behind the wheel and across the seat to open the door for Aunt Bessie. "Sometimes in Ohio we had white Halloweens." *Should I have unlocked her door first?* he wondered. If this were New York he wouldn't. If it were Ohio he would. But this was Pennsylvania. He put the matter out of his mind. He put the key into the ignition. There was no sound from the engine, merely a very little *click* of the key itself. He held his breath and tried again.

"Good Lord, Mr. Mysterious Traveler," said Aunt Bessie, "your car won't start. Just like the lights and the watches and the flashlights. What's happening?"

Courane frowned. *Don't be silly,* he thought. He turned the key again. In the cold quiet the small *click* was shattering, final. They all sat in the car and looked through the frosty windshield.

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Finally Mandy sighed. "I saw a movie once," she said. "It had Jack Lemmon in it, I think, and this girl. It was made in New York. They have chestnuts on street corners; men sell them hot this time of year. It must be nice."

"Very charming," said Aunt Bessie. "You'll enjoy New York if you ever get there, my dear. But Sandor can tell you of its dangers." Courane said nothing, holding the steering wheel very tightly.

They all got out of the car, remarking among themselves how strange it was that everything electrical in the neighborhood had been made inoperative. They all agreed that the situation was disturbing, and each silently considered the circumstances if the condition were to continue indefinitely. They walked along Ridge Street for several blocks. When they got to the corner of West Third, Mandy said, "This is a real emergency, isn't it?"

"Let's just go home now, dear," said Aunt Bessie. "They'll have it all cleared up in the morning. They usually do. Someone just forgot to throw a switch."

Courane sighed, knowing that he had lost at least a day's traveling time. He felt a sudden fear that the one day would be a tremendous importance, that his relationship with his parents was precariously balanced, that they were *just* on the verge of irrevocably severing ties with him, that they had put off that decision until tonight and his absence had persuaded them. His arrival tomorrow would mean nothing. How like his luck it would be. Just as he began to realize how important his parents were to him, they gave up forever on trying to communicate. He might as well turn around and go home.

"Weren't you born and raised right here in Gremmage, Mr. Courane?" asked Aunt Bessie as she struggled to open her front door.

"No," he said slowly. "No, I don't think so. Ohio. I'm from Ohio."

"Because on the back of that book it mentioned that you graduated from Hanson High in 1965. That's the same year as the Danijek boy who used to deliver our papers." Aunt Bessie pushed open the door into the black, scented mouth of her home. She turned to look inquiringly at Courane.

"They even had you speak at the commencement last year," said Mandy. "I got to see you because I'm in the orchestra."

"That's very nice," said Courane.

"You have him mixed up," said Aunt Bessie. "That was the other one, what's-his-name, Berge. The one who works on the newspaper in Oil City."

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"How *is* Denny?" asked Courane. "Last I heard he was going into the Navy."

Aunt Bessie reached in and flicked on the light switch. The room stayed dark. She turned around and smiled. "Why, he's married now. He married that cute Barbieri girl. They live in Oil City." Aunt Bessie and Mandy went into the house, leaving Courane on the porch. He felt light-headed and cold. He wanted to sleep. He regretted not opening the trunk of his car and getting his suitcase. He needed his pajamas and his books.

"I was born in Cleveland," he said, but no one heard him. "I went to Collinwood High for a while, and then we moved. But not *here*."

"Come in out of the fog, out of the night, Sandor," called Aunt Bessie. "I've lit some candles." Courane smiled, appreciating the quality and good taste of the strangeness. He entered the house and closed the door behind him.

"It's already late, Sandor. I think I'll go up to bed," said Aunt Bessie. "Mandy will show you to your room. I hope you'll be comfortable."

"I'm sure I will," he said.

"If you need anything —" she said, and he nodded, not listening. At last she said good night; as Aunt Bessie started up the stairs, she turned and whispered, "I think she's very fond of you."

"Who is?" whispered Courane, but Aunt Bessie didn't hear. Courane was left alone at the bottom of the stairs. "Whatever happened to your boyfriend, Johnson? Shouldn't you be worried?" he called. There was no reply.

A few minutes later Mandy came downstairs. "You know why I dislike Norman so much?" she asked. Courane shook his head. He didn't care. "Because he smells like a lime," she said, wrinkling her mouth into a comic semblance of nausea.

"I thought you really liked him," said Courane. "Your boyfriend, Norman. Ronald."

"Why would anyone want to smell like a lime?" she asked.

"I smell like the skin of a small Asiatic deer," said Courane.

Mandy looked into his eyes and smiled. "I know," she said softly. Courane followed her upstairs to his room. He said good night and closed and locked the door. He undressed quickly and got into bed. For the first time in many years he thought about praying and fell soundly asleep.

The next morning Courane was awakened by the racket of an electric can opener from downstairs. He sat up blearily and rubbed his head. It seemed dark in the room. He wondered what time it was. As he was getting dressed,

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he smiled; the sound of the appliances meant that electricity was working again. Crisis over. Onward; he looked forward to driving, to being up and going, putting the miles of hard gray behind him. Would Bonnie be glad to see him? He went downstairs.

"Good morning," he said brightly. Aunt Bessie smiled. Mandy looked up from her bowl of cereal and nodded. "Thank you so much for letting me stay here, but I ought to be going. I ought to call Bonnie and tell her that I'll be home tonight. I really ought to have called her yesterday. May I use your phone?"

"Who's Bonnie?' asked Aunt Bessie.

"My wife," said Courane slowly. "I mean, you told me yourself. My wife, Bonnie. She'll be worried."

"You're married," said Mandy, laughing, "but her name isn't Bonnie. I don't remember what it is exactly, but Bonnie it sure isn't."

"Are you sure?" asked Courane, feeling the nightmare panic of the day before filling him.

"She's right," said Aunt Bessie. "I know it isn't Bonnie. Anyway, you were going to Ohio, weren't you? Why on earth would you go to Ohio?"

"I...live...there. My wife and I."

Aunt Bessie shook her head. "It's still too early, I suppose. You live in New York with your wife and three cats. I can't remember what your wife's name is."

"Why am I here?" he asked.

"Sit down," said Aunt Bessie. "Sit down and have some bacon." Courane sat slowly at the table, knowing that he ought to be at work. There was a convention that he was going to soon; if he finished the pencil sharpener story soon enough, he could take it with him. He knew that McElhenny would love it. Where was the convention? Pittsburgh? Philadelphia? One of those towns. He wondered whether or not McElhenny would remember him. He never had before.

"Do you have a typewriter here, Aunt Bessie?" he asked.

"Why, yes, Mandy has one," she said.

"It's up in my room, Sandor," said Mandy, smiling, smiling the way they smiled at Wenrope, his fictional fool and hero. Courane imagined Mandy's room and the cloying, felt-covered, lavender typewriter; he shuddered and frowned, killing her suggestion that they go upstairs to look for it.

"Why ever would you want a typewriter?" asked Aunt Bessie. "Aren't you going? Didn't you say that you wanted to get an early start? Unless you've changed your mind."

Mandy had stopped eating. "Oh, please, Sandor!" she said.

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"No, not yet," he said. His head began to hurt him early today. "I'm on my way somewhere, and important things are hanging in the balance. I'm taking chances with love and respect and honor and all those. How do I get home?"

"Where *is* your home, Sandor?" asked Mandy softly.

"You can't go home," said Aunt Bessie. When Courane's mouth opened in surprise, as he accepted the new strangeness, as he fit himself into the pattern of Hollywood black-and-white horror, she spoiled it all. "I mean, *again.* You know. You can't go home again. You know." Courane nodded.

"It's certainly dark in here," he said.

"We have all the shades drawn," said Mandy.

Aunt Bessie pulled the shade out from the kitchen window a bit, peeking out into the backyard. "Old Man Durfee's out there again. Pennsylvania's own distinctive laugh novelty."

"Does he drink?" asked Courane, rising and going over to have a few laughs at the old man's expense.

"He knows many things," said Aunt Bessie, "for he walks by night." She chuckled and pulled down the shade again as Courane joined her at the sink. "Sit down, Sandor. Bacon's just about done."

"Tell me about him," he said.

"Later," said Mandy. "When you tell me about how you write violence."

"Later," Courane agreed. "Why do you have all the shades down now?"

"No reason," said Mandy.

"They just happen to be down is all," said Aunt Bessie.

"Well, I wonder what the weather is today," said Courane, getting up to take a look. "I have to drive a long way, you know. I hate driving in the rain."

"You can't leave until you've seen your friends, the Youngs," said Mandy.

"Their struggle for security is anybody's story," said Aunt Bessie. "Why don't you take the bus? It's only a few dollars to Pittsburgh."

"I have my car," said Courane. "I'll just take a peek at the sky. I really ought to be going."

"Wait a minute, Sandor," said Mandy. "Do you take care to include humorous bits of trivia and nostalgia in your stories? That would make them popular. Are your characters afflicted with realistic and important personal problems? Do you introduce the conflict early enough to hook the readers' interest? Do you avoid cuteness and facile cliches?"

"No," he said, "no, not usually. I just want to spin a good yarn. Whatever sophisticated technique I

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have is unconscious and natural. You have to be born with it."

"Sit down, said Aunt Bessie. "Your bacon is getting cold."

"I won't worry about the sky," he said.

"Good," said Mandy. "Bill Johnson ought to be coming by soon with a detailed explanation. Norman used to do that, but now all he thinks about is his car."

The doorbell rang, and Courane shook his head. Aunt Bessie flustered about for a few seconds, patting errant wisps of hair and smoothing her clam diggers. She left the kitchen to answer the door. Mandy looked up from her cereal and smiled. Courane felt cold.

"That's probably Johnson now," he said nervously.

"It usually is," said Mandy. "I wonder if he'll remember you."

"Tell me about Old Man Durfee. It'd be great to put him in a book. Maybe *Time Spy*. Instead of some ridiculous villain, it would be a change to see Wenrope worked over by an old wino."

"What would you do if something happened to your wife? Norman tells me that I have nice legs. Do you think so? I mean, you could push her down the stairs or into the bay or something. I've got the best years of my life ahead of me."

"Your boyfriend's name is Ronald."

"He thinks that I have nice legs."

"Mr. Courane?" Aunt Bessie came back into the kitchen with her fiance. "You remember Bill, don't you?"

"Certainly," said Courane.

"Good morning, anybody," said Johnson. "I couldn't help overhearing your discussion with Mandy. If you need any help murdering your wife, why, I've read all the books."

"I appreciate it very much," said Courane, noticing the thin film of congealing grease on his bacon.

"Not now, Bill," said Aunt Bessie. "There's time enough for that later. Sit down and have some breakfast."

"I've already eaten," said Johnson. "But give me some of that famous bacon of yours."

"I didn't think you'd remember!" said Aunt Bessie.

"What's it like out today?" asked Courane. He felt a unique tension, a vague, sick coldness in his stomach. Would it be clear, windy, crisp autumn? Or dark and stormy, making his journey a day-long headache. Or snow...

"Strange. The sky is all —"

"Here," said Aunt Bessie, "let's show him." She went to the window and rolled up the shade. A heavy green light came in, building freakish shadows and making disturbing masks of the faces in the

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kitchen. Courane rose part way from his chair. The sky was dark and ominously, crazily green. There was a narrow bright aura around the objects outside, houses, trees, poles. Nothing moved. No breeze disturbed the photographic stillness, and Courane pictured his car outlined in blinding white. What would they say at home, or in Pittsburgh, when he drove that old Fairlane in with a glowing shell around it? That sort of detail made the situation cheap, and he was saddened. It was a hack's afterthought; he had used it himself on several occasions when he could think of nothing stranger, and seeing it here made him lose a little interest. He wasn't a hack, himself. He knew what he wrote, and he had few pretensions. Not like the others, who churned out ten thousand words a day of mighty thews and level gazes. He wanted to be home, in Akron or New York, one way or the other, with his wife and three cats; he wanted to get to work, to write about these *real* people, to put honesty and observation into the flat, cardboard plots that were all he could devise.

"What is it?" asked Courane.

"Nothing," said Johnson. "Just a little stiff. I had my collarbone broken when I was a kid."

"No, I mean outside!"

"Oh. Well, I worked on it all morning. If you want, we could go for a drive and I could demonstrate."

"Don't you have to go to school, Mandy?" asked Courane.

"The school will be closed, I guess," she said.

"It usually is," said Aunt Bessie.

"It's very simple, really," said Johnson. "The entire town of Gremmage is now surrounded by some sort of force field."

Courane gasped. His wife could never have foreseen anything like this. He had a ludicrous moment, as he imagined himself writing a postcard from a Rexall's, a color picture of a strip mine on the back: "Sorry that I'm late, dear. There's a force field around the town. Give my regards to our three cats." To whom would he address it?

"I know what a force field is," he said. "God, I've used enough of them in my stories. But I thought they were just another of my crazy ideas."

"No, Sandor," said Johnson slowly, "I'm afraid this one isn't."

Mandy continued to eat from her bottomless bowl. Aunt Bessie finished cooking and brought a platter of glistening bacon to the table. "Do you have any idea where it came from?" asked Courane.

"Not exactly. But I have worked out the process by which it operates. Somehow, someone has learned a great deal of abstract

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things about the mechanics of subatomic particles. The actual process involved here is so sophisticated that it is impossible to describe with our present level of understanding. We are witnessing the results of a great deal of brilliant thinking and research. It seems, simply, that the agent unknown has been able to shield the nucleus of the atom, so that the protons located there are effectively neutralized. That gives each atom a very strong negative charge. Each unit then repels its neighbor."

"Like the similar ends of two magnets repel each other," said Mandy.

"Poles, you mean. Right," said Johnson.

"You know, Sandor," said Mandy wistfully, "I think that we are *meant* to meet this way." Aunt Bessie beamed happily.

"Just inside that layer of negative atoms is a small layer of, well, pure charge. There are no particles or atoms to carry that charge. In fact, my studies suggest that the area is the most perfectly evacuated zone imaginable. Just a totally homogeneous space of mixed positive and negative charge. Sounds pretty incredible, I know, but there it is."

"Like sound waves traveling in a vacuum," said Mandy. No one said anything this time.

"Within that is another layer, this one of positive atoms. Here the electrons are coated, just the opposite of the first layer. The positive charge in the middle area attracts the first layer but repels the third. The negative charge in the middle area attracts the third but repels the first. And the total strength of each field is enough to repel anything of the appropriate charge. Thus, if you walked toward it with only one, solitary positive ion on you, the positive zone wouldn't let you near. The two charged areas don't cancel each other out; for some reason they work together. Even though one is attracting you, the other is strong enough to keep you from passing through the barrier."

"Amazing," said Courane.

"Now maybe you won't have to kill your wife," said Aunt Bessie.

"Just your parents, wherever they are," said Mandy, smiling.

"Uxoricide is pretty trite these days, anyway," said Johnson. "Then you'd put it in a book, and we'd send it to Korea, and that's the last sort of thing that we want our boys over there to read."

"Let's go for a walk," said Aunt Bessie.

Good grief, thought Courane, going upstairs to get his jacket.

Courane and the three Gremmagers met in the living room. Aunt Bessie and Mandy were smiling and giggling, and Johnson

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bent his head often toward the older woman's ear to whisper secret things. Courane watched them nervously; there was a festival atmosphere here where there ought to have been panic. Where he came from a green sky meant tornadoes. Going for a walk beneath an impenetrable force field was a new sort of outing for him, at least in October. He loved fall; he remembered how he used to go down to the park for long hikes, trying to force out a mood of sensitivity. He wanted to share a good, heavy romantic ecstasy, but all that he ever achieved was a sad wistfulness. The trees seemed so proud to him, suddenly apple yellow or maroon; the change from uniform green was an accomplishment he could never equal. He began to understand the eagerness to go outside. He had imprisoned himself too long in New York.

"Just a second," said Aunt Bessie. "Let me go outside and see if Old Man Durfee is still around."

"Why?" asked Courane, trying to unstick his jacket's zipper.

"It always makes him feel good," said Mandy. "If we get his permission, I mean. He used to be guardian of the forests, champion of man and nature."

Aunt Bessie returned, and nodded. Everyone smiled. "Could he be the one responsible for the force field?" asked Courane.

Johnson laughed indulgently. "That's really funny, Mandy! No, he used to be brilliant, but unstable. He's just an old lovable sot, these days."

"A friend to those who have no friends?" said Courane.

Aunt Bessie stared in amazement. "Then you know? You've caught on?"

"No, not really," said Courane. "I still ought to be going. But I know a lot about the old radio days."

"What tipped you off?"

Courane still hadn't fixed his zipper. He watched his hands working while he answered. "'Distinctive laugh novelty.' I haven't heard that in a long time."

"But how old are you? You're certainly not old enough to remember —"

"Who sponsored 'The Falcon'?" Courane asked, giving up on the jacket and stuffing his hands casually into the pockets.

"Rinso."

"No. Gem Blades."

Aunt Bessie frowned. "Be careful with him, Mandy. Come on; we ought to leave if we're going."

Outside, the dead paper leaves shuffled over their feet as they walked, and from his knotted stomach he felt an eruption of winter futility, a desire to embrace the still-living in a seasonal affirmation of joy. The sharp sound

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of the leaves was the cue, and only the unbroken mood of strangeness aided him in fighting the mellowness. The others succumbed, however. Aunt Bessie and Johnson held hands, the difference in their ages disappearing behind the transient mask of infatuation. Mandy skipped through the deepest piles of leaves, laughing predictably. Perhaps this walk traced a still-remembered Halloween foraging route for her. Apples, suckers, sticks of gum this year beneath the hard artificial green sky.

The horizon was very close. Between the houses Courane could see the nearby curve of the green dome, the yet-exciting hemisphere of the force field. It looked like smooth old jade; within it everything still had its tinsel-touch of aura, and the separate glowings merged as he walked down the street. From the corner of his eye he saw disturbing conjunctions of brightness, as houses eclipsed trees or the sharp, thin whiteness of a telephone pole slid behind a glowing buildling. None of the people were affected, however, and Courane was glad, as he stared briefly at his hands and put them back into his pockets.

"Ah, Bessie," said an old woman, walking along the sidewalk toward them. She carried two heavy shopping bags filled with groceries. "You do look happy this morning. And so does your bewildering offspring."

"Good morning, Mrs. Selbst. You've met Mandy, haven't you? She was Mary and Larry's baby. She lives with me now."

"Ah, yes," said old Mrs. Selbst. "Mandy. I've known you since you were a little child. And this must be William Johnson, eh?" She was smiling at Courane. Everyone but the old woman shook his head.

"*I'm* Bill Johnson. That is Sanford Curry, a friend of Aunt Bessie's."

"Courane," said Courane. "I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Have you noticed the sky?" asked Mrs. Selbst. "It looks like it's going to snow. You can always tell by the sweet potatoes. It'll snow soon."

"It usually does," said Mandy.

"Well, I have to get these groceries home," she said. "My daughter-in-law is having a force field party or some such. I'll see you all in church."

They bid her good-by and walked on. Courane was pressing himself deeper and deeper into the maze of strange thoughts, giving himself up to it and feeling deliciously, dangerously seduced. Mandy broke in on his concentration with a laugh. "Why don't you do a science fiction story about Aunt Bessie's bacon?" she said.

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Aunt Bessie and Johnson laughed.

"Let's go bowling," said Courane, staring at the force field, seemingly only four or five yards away. People sat on their porch steps and smiled. Others raked leaves into piles in their yards. No one took any notice of the force field, other than to wave and point, or call out that it cut them off from the Oil City shopping center.

Courane dropped back beside Johnson and whispered, "I'd like to talk with you, Bill."

"Certainly. Just a second." Johnson bent down, pretending to tie his shoelace. "Why don't you show Mandy the gingko tree?" he said to Aunt Bessie.

Courane waited until they were alone. "Tell me truthfully. What does that thing mean?" He pointed to the force field, his hand still in his pocket.

"Let me put it this way, Sandy. Someone can flood the virgin atom, painting it with electrical charges and bending its unimaginable forces to his will. It's a big thing, Sandy, almost too big for the imagination of us laymen to cope with."

"In your own words, then, we're doomed?"

Johnson snorted skeptically. "No, I wouldn't say that. No one is ever 'doomed' these days."

"But what about *us?* We can't get out, can we? No one can get in, can they? What about the air? Won't it all go bad in a matter of days?"

"Why would anyone want to get out?" Johnson asked, rising and hurrying to catch up with Aunt Bessie. "Stay here for a while, Sandy. You'll like Gremmage."

Courane didn't follow; he waved to the others. He grinned broadly, one hand pushed almost painfully deep into the pocket of his jacket, his feet idly disturbing the unambitious towers of leaves. Johnson, Aunt Bessie, and Mandy were heading home again, up Mockingbird Lane, across Wistful Vista to the serious, cold center of West Third Street. He had told them that he, of course, had a great deal of thinking to do. He had new relations to understand, old ties to forget, a whole new existence to build. Certainly they couldn't expect him to just rid himself of his past and plug right into a new life. He had to sort things out, think things through, get things together. They had all nodded wisely, and he nodded back and waved. He watched them as they left him on the sidewalk, and he felt the dream sorrow of loneliness bring tears to his eyes.

It smelled wonderful, like autumn that's almost over as you're realizing it's *here.* Courane walked slowly for a while, trying desperately to love it, noticing the flam-

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boyant trees and the year's last quickness in the air; but beneath it all he could still hear himself pleading. And that ruined it all. He knew that he was just pretending that he was aimlessly walking toward the static green force field.

If he kept going straight down Mockingbird Lane, he knew that he'd come out on Ridge Street eventually, only a short distance from where his car was parked. It looked as if the force field would intersect Ridge and a few blocks farther out, near the edge of town by the Dairy Queen. It wouldn't be long now before Vic reopened the slumbering stand as the Xmas Tree Depot. Courane chuckled out loud, wondering how he knew about Vic.

Mockingbird Lane curved down a steep hill. The street was paved with red bricks, and yellow tufts of grass grew among them. Courane walked in the middle of the road, and no traffic forced him back to the sidewalk. There was no noise at all, except for the bumping of his shoes on the brick and the wind-blown rustle of the leaves. The road ran into Ridge Street at the bottom of the hill, at a point between the school and the diner where Courane had met Mandy the night before. Already it seemed to him as though he had known her all his life. Perhaps in some way he had. Perhaps that was what the Gremmagers were trying to tell him.

As he walked he felt colder and more alone. He turned to look over his shoulder; sometimes he thought that all he could see was a large reflecting surface. Other times he saw muddy colored blobs that might have been people forming or sinking back to leafy camouflage. The diner was dark and locked up tight when he went by. People on the sidewalk strolled in the autumn-fine weather, arm in arm like on the set of a movie musical, pointing out the unvaried sky of green. Stores and offices were open or closed according to proprietary whim. Children bought new force field coloring books in the drug stores or bags of toy soldiers to stand at the base of the curved shell around the town.

"Mr. Courane?"

The voice startled Courane from his artificial melancholy. "Yes?" he said, turning around to see a young man dressed in blue jeans, open-necked sport shirt, and green pullover.

"Hi," said the boy, "I'm Norman. Maybe Mandy's told you about me."

"Ronald," said Courane. "You're Ronald."

"That's right. I was wondering if I could talk with you for a minute."

Courane hated problems, confusions, especially coincidences. Coincidences that make things

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worse are easily swallowed by the audience. Coincidences that improve the lot of the protagonist will look cheap. The silent new barrier was only a short distance away now; Courane wanted desperately to see it, to touch it if he could, to smell such a mystery and write about it to all his friends. His mother and father would never have the opportunity to see one, more than likely. And his unhappy wife! What would she think? She had a difficult enough time already, first existing in his heart and then, the next moment, totally forgotten or recalled under a spurious name. She certainly deserved better treatment. If he could remember whether or not he loved her still, he would act.

"Things seem to be drawing to their conclusion," said Ronald.

"Are they?" Courane was actually mildly bored by the young man, but was curious to understand the strengths of his rival. "I'm very new here. I hardly know the proper pacing. There's been no word from outside, you know."

Ronald smiled and bent his head back to stare up at the green ceiling. "That's only fair," he said. "We haven't sent any word out, either."

"How soon will it be before we know what's happened?"

"That's funny, you asking *me* that," said Ronald, laughing. "Oh, everybody knows. The world's dead. Civilization as we know it is destroyed. You should have figured it all out, writing that way-out stuff you do. That's what I want to talk to you about."

Good Lord, thought Courane, *here it comes. The budding young writer looking for advice.*

"I have some advice for you," said Norman. "You write stories like football coaches make game plans."

"That's an analogy," said Courane irritably. "I dislike analogies, especially the neat ones. But go on, Ronald, go on. Tell me what is wrong with my stories."

"Well, first off, if you don't mind me criticizing, they're never set anywhere. I mean, one place is the same as another. Like the inside of a stadium is like the inside of another stadium. Do you know what I mean?"

Courane nodded. He was thinking about a dream that he had had the night before. He had dreamed about *Time Spy,* a book that he hadn't even finished writing. It was so sad when he awoke and realized that he still had to finish that piece of junk.

"And your characters," said Ronald. "Gosh, I mean the characters *are* one of the most important parts of a story, aren't they? Well, you use them like a football coach. You have a starting

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line-up in the first chapter. They're all familiar, even if their names aren't. It doesn't take long before everyone in the ball park knows their strengths and weaknesses. And you make substitutions, too. Some minor lineman comes in every couple of thousand words with a plot development from the bench. Once or twice you change running backs or wide receivers, a major crisis to keep the readers interested. You treat your audience like a stubborn goal-line defense. You pound them for every yard, but you know that you don't have a chance for a championship title. Before the game even starts, you'll gladly settle for a tie."

"I dreamed that *Time Spy* was finished," said Courane quietly. "I saw the book. A beautiful hardcover with a tasteful dust jacket. The pages were designed so well I was proud; I mean type faces and layout and all. And almost every page had a gorgeous illustration, a little watercolor painting. I was really proud. Then I woke up."

"I didn't mean to sound nasty, Mr. Courane," said Ronald quickly. "I've read every word you've ever written, and I've always enjoyed it. You have a way of pulling the reader right into the story, so you don't notice the nonsense until afterward, when you think about it. I don't know what I would have done over there if they hadn't sent me that one about the asteroid."

"Over there?"

"I was a camp counselor at Lake Hopatcong. *Space Spy*, it was."

They were getting very close to the force field. Courane could smell a strange, pungent odor. "I thought you meant Korea," he said.

Ronald shook his head. "Not likely," he said, kicking a rock across the sidewalk. "They tried, but my marrow's thin."

"Oh," said Courane, and they walked on a few yards in silence.

They passed the Dairy Queen, and Courane saw Sade inside, busily polishing up the shiny steel machines. She waved to him as he walked by. "I dreamed that I read a great review," he said. "Some critics said that I had written a tight, exquisite book. Said that I outdid Robert N. James. *Time Spy*. Friends called up to congratulate me, it was such a terrific review. Then I woke up."

Even close up, the force field was the same dull color. Objects nearby were coated with a thin, bright blur of aura; Courane thought that perhaps the nearer one was to the field, the more extreme its effects would become. This was evidently not the case. He walked toward the curved green wall; it arched down from the sky

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and disappeared neatly into the ground. He stretched out his hand to touch it. "Bet you can't," said Ronald.

He couldn't. He felt a slightly thrilling force, as though he were trying to press congruent ends of two magnets together. He couldn't approach closer than four or five feet. "I wish it would go away," he said, remembering that he had important things to consider, that he didn't really belong inside the town, that he was caught in a short moment of flux, on his way to somewhere, from somewhere, someone. And all his answers were in other places.

Courane had made few observations in his lifetime. Once in a while he would discover something; nothing new, usually an affirmation of some point he had learned by rote and never thought about. But it always made him feel intelligent to put some minor facts together to spring a minimal insight, reiterating the thought of some classical genius. One such observation concerned soap bubbles.

On one occasion not long before his arrival in Gremmage, Courane had been soaking in a warm tubful of water, watching the clouds of bubbles dying about him. He observed that the larger bubbles would go through a series of physical changes before they popped. At first a bubble would refract the light of the bathroom in bright cheerful points of color: reds, violets, magentas, rare greens. After a few minutes or less these sturdy, unwavering colors would shift and run, like the mixing hues of oil on water. If he blew across the surface gently enough, the superthin layer of color would slide and tumble over the curved area. Then the bands would begin to run down the sides of the bubble, leaving the top part completely invisible. The bubble was still intact, as experimentation proved, and the abandoned zone was not just *clear* but unoutlined and completely nonreflective; eventually the entire bubble was invisible, and then a disturbance of the suds around its base attested to its sudden demise. Perhaps it has something to do with evaporation rates, and no doubt it is affected by mysterious surface tensions and architectural enigmas. But Courane had satisfied his scientific curiosity with the mere observation, and the causes of the phenomenon held no interest for him.

He watched the same thing happening on the inner surface of the force field. Colors ran and mingled. It was gorgeous, though frightening. Norman reminded him, perhaps with a slight sadistic relish, that the outside world was destroyed, exceptionally dead, and that the force field was all that

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had protected Gremmage. After a few minutes the zenith was clear, and a bright, cloudless blue sky was visible. Farther down the sides of the force field the colors dripped, and more and more of a tortured and extinct landscape was revealed. There was a mild *pop!* and the force field was gone. Courane looked into Ronald's grinning face and shrugged. They still lived.

Courane felt a peculiar movement and whipping of trouser material below his knees, as though a heavy but very low-level storm were occurring several inches above the ground. He glanced down and saw a thick, rushing haze of green. All around him green drifts of some material were forming. A green mist of the stuff blew in waves along the empty street. It settled and began to cover the lonely islands of dead leaves, making an emerald winter wonderland. Although the sky was clear, it was very dark now, as though the sun were just tired. Courane stood on the pavement, slightly dizzy, a trifle cold, forgetful; his last thoughts, made brittle by remorse, snapped and powdered against the final realization that he would never again open the trunk of his car and examine its contents.

Courane bent down and scooped up a handful of the green snow. It was warm in his hand, and when he squeezed it, it wouldn't pack into a ball. It continued to blow into the town from the burnt-out world outside, but whatever effect it had had on the world-at-large was surrendered at the town limits. The heavy green snow was lifted on gusts of wind, and it piled deeper and deeper.

"We could kill you with that, Sandor," said Mandy cheerfully. Courane turned around, startled, and saw a large crowd of people: Aunt Bessie and Bill Johnson, Mrs. Perkins and Old Man Durfee, Ronald, and more, dozens more.

All these people remembered him! "What do you mean?" he asked.

Mandy took the green snow from his hand and put it in her mouth. "This stuff would poison you if you swallowed it," she said. "You'd be black and dead before you could spit it out. Unless you want to come to the dance tonight. And tomorrow. We have lots of dances." The others in the crowd began to shout, urging Courane to stay. They honestly liked him, but he thought that there were reasons why he ought to be going.

"How can I say?" he said. "I mean, I must have been going someplace. I can't just disappear."

"You haven't disappered, dear," said Aunt Bessie. "You've emerged."

"Gee," said Courane, "I don't know." No one said anything,

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letting him work through the crisis by himself. But all that he could think about were the wonderful friends that he had here, and the inviting, sensuous lips of Mandy.

"By the way," said Ronald, "if you're thinking that there'd be trouble with us, I mean you and me and Mandy, why, I see that she's in love with you. I just want her to be happy."

"That's very noble of you, Norman," said Courane, feeling happy and anxious. "Well, I suppose it's been a long time since I've been to a sock hop. Might be fun." Mandy scooped another handful of the warm green snow and offered it to Courane.

"Go on, Sandor," she said. "You'll like it now; go on." Courane opened his mouth. The strange snow melted quickly away, like tasteless spun sugar. Mandy kissed him. He thought about his new life, and wondered about his old. Did he have a family? He felt sad, because if he did they were all dead, now. Along with the rest of the world. He knew that it was a sad thing to have your family killed suddenly.

Mandy completed her kiss. She gazed up happily into his eyes. Courane took her hand and they walked slowly through the deepening green powder. Beyond the low brick buildings of Gremmage everything was smoking and dead, but Courane felt a new elation. Mandy squeezed his hand. "Life can be beautiful!" she said.

Courane dropped her hand and slowly walked back up the street, away from the crowd of Gremmagers, away from their hungry glee. Courane did not see them frown. He did not see Mandy start toward him along the sidewalk, through the autumn green snow.

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Courane was wrapped in his crazy shadow, with one foot still raised, ready to be placed in one world or the other. He set it down into the green stuff. As he walked to his car he kicked up misty puffs of snow.

Mandy cried, and Aunt Bessie called after him, but he did not turn around. His car was covered with the snow, and he cleared a space on the windshield with three quick swipes. He got into the car, and smiled when it started immediately. He would have loved to stay in Gremmage, where the townspeople had been so kind, but that sort of life was not for him. No, he mused sadly, his way was set by some stranger god, and he knew that he could never find a Gremmage kind of happiness.

Steve Wenrope pulled away from the curb and headed out of town along Ridge Street. He passed the small knot of people. He could not remember who any of them were, but that was his curse. In a quarter of a mile he was driving into his exhausted asteroid, through a pitted realm of darkness and death. Perhaps, just a few inches away on the other side of the glass, perhaps there was no hope, no future at all for him, but that was the life that Wenrope was used to. Even though there was no air to breathe on his asteroid, he pushed his jaw forward in his characteristic manner. As he plunged forward to his unknown fate, into the midnight vacuum of destruction, a grim smile played about his features.

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